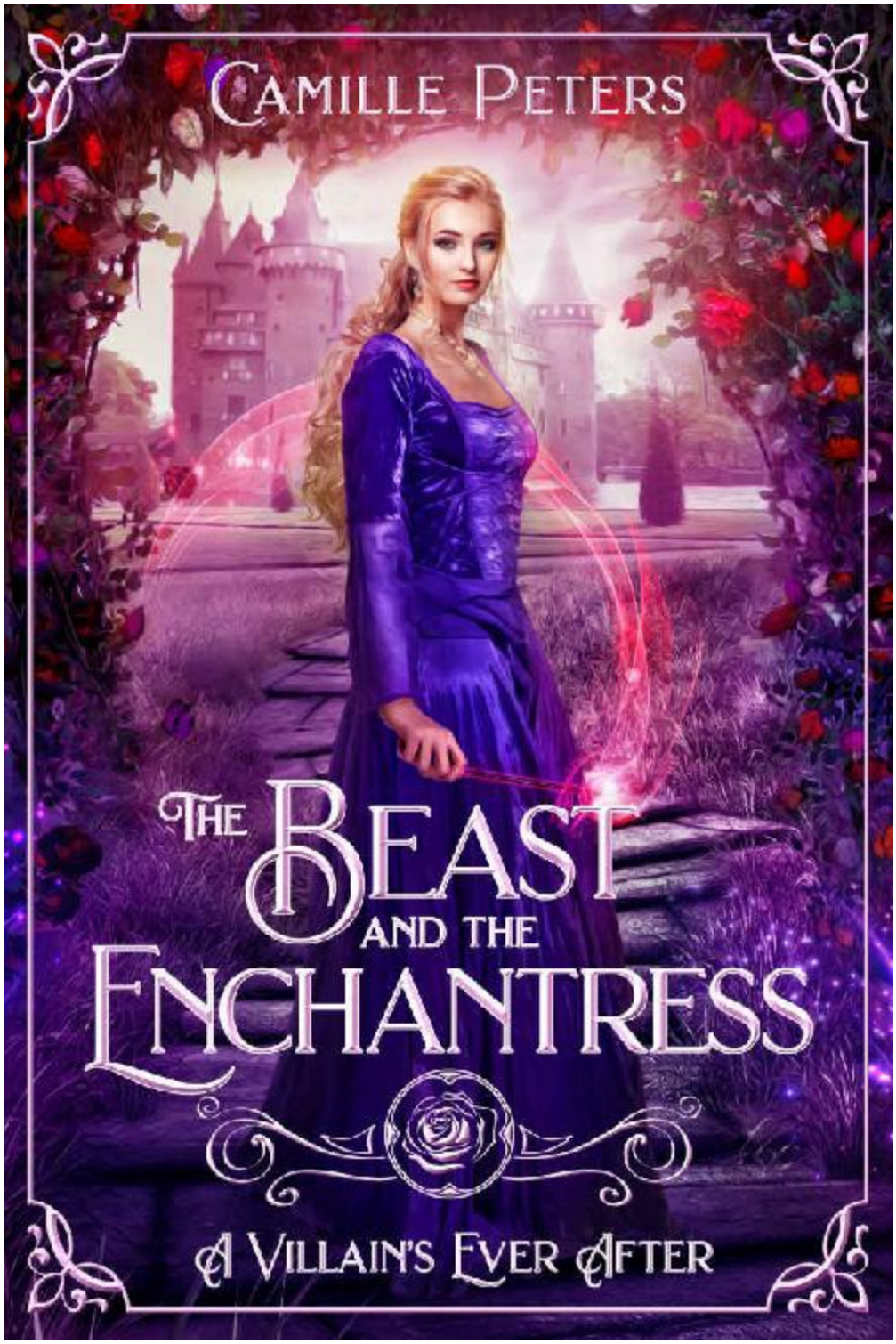

THE BEAST AND THE ENCHANTRESS

CAMILLE PETERS

THE BEAST AND THE ENCHANTRESS

By: Rosewood Publications

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To all who desire to find healing in order to move forward—you fully deserve the beautiful happily

ever after you long for.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Epilogue

Also by Camille Peters

Other Books in “A Villain’s Ever After”

Thank You

Acknowledgments

About the Author

C H A P T E R 1

H aughtiness was apparently an essential princely quality inherited at birth, yet this was

no deterrent for my sweet younger sister. Rosemarie gazed doe-eyed at Prince Gladen

as he strolled—or perhaps a more apt description would be *strutted*, in a most

annoying regal manner that caused his velvet cloak to sway *just so*—through the royal grounds with a

dark-haired, dark-eyed beauty on his arm.

His intended. The fact that the prince was practically engaged did nothing to lessen Rosemarie's

infatuation or her frequent tendency to spy on him whenever she had a day off to spend with me.

Dear Rosemarie.

I fought an amused smile as I watched her for a moment before returning to my current task—

procuring the petals of the flowers I needed for my next spell, a healing enchantment that required

different parts from a variety of herbs and plants.

I stooped down to pluck three petals from a purple echinacea flower before carefully studying the

ancient book floating beside me with a simple levitation spell. I was still missing the minced root

from a royal fern, an ingredient that wouldn't be amongst the colorful aster, magnolia, and gardenia

blossoms.

I gave my spellbook a little nudge to encourage it to follow me, which it faithfully did as I

wandered the next row of vibrant flowers arranged in artistic patterns.

“Astrid!” I startled at Rosemarie’s excited whisper and turned to find her no longer ogling the

prince but wringing her hands in distress.

Concern immediately eclipsed my previous concentration. I hastily stepped forward. “What is it?

Are you alright?”

Her nervous gaze darted behind her. In my distraction, the prince had entered the garden and now

ambled up the path some distance away, oblivious to anything except for the woman on his arm, her

fluttering eyelashes, and her false, overly cheery laugh, all of which were a rather sickening display.

“It’s the prince,” she said breathlessly, despite such an observation being entirely unnecessary.

“He’s in the garden. Perhaps he’ll finally notice me. Oh, I’m so nervous. What should I say if he

pauses to converse? What if he doesn’t remember me?”

Her breathing escalated as her panic rose, coming out in short, hyperventilating breaths. I rested

my hands on her shaking shoulders. “Breathe, Rosemarie.”

Rather than settling, her breaths only grew sharper, more agitated. I hooked my arm through hers

and gently led her to the neighboring garden, a charming arrangement of fountains and hedgerows. We

settled on the edge of one of the fountains, which had the soothing effect I'd hoped for; as she listened

to the cascading water, she gradually calmed.

She buried her face in her hands with a moan. "I'm utterly hopeless."

I gave her shoulder a reassuring pat. "You just find yourself flustered by a charming face."

"Such a description doesn't do the prince justice; he's utterly *handsome*. But you know it's more

than that."

I pursed my lips. Prince Gladen *was* handsome, quite so. The problem was he well knew it. In all

my observations of His Highness I'd quickly discovered he had little else to recommend him, making

him entirely unworthy of my sister, no matter how much she fancied herself in love with him.

Her childhood memories of the prince had undoubtedly blinded her to his true character. They'd

been friends as children, spending many afternoons together while our mother served in her position

as Royal Enchantress and I became immersed in my magic studies. But everything had changed when

Father died. Rosemarie's grief caused her to become withdrawn—she stopped spending time

outdoors. Soon Prince Gladen became occupied with his royal duties, and their friendship gradually

faded. I had never actually met him back when he and Rosemarie were friends, but what I'd learned

of him in the last three years was enough to tell me that he was likely to break her heart.

My apprenticeship to the new Royal Enchantress had granted Rosemarie the opportunity to see

more of her childhood friend, albeit from afar, and her fond memories of him—along with the fact

he'd grown intimidatingly handsome—had gradually led to her infatuation, one I heartily disapproved

of. Rosemarie was a quiet, gentle, and sensitive soul, an adorer of things like fluffy kittens, pretty

flowers, and delicious pastries. The shallow, scheming world of the royal court was no place for her,

something she was currently too starry-eyed to realize.

Rosemarie straightened with a sigh, embarrassment staining her cheeks. "I know what you must be

thinking: I'm being ridiculous."

I gave her a guilty smile. "I admit I've never understood your infatuation with the prince."

"He was my dearest childhood playmate, one I want nothing more than to reconnect with."

If only she could see that the conceited prince wasn't anything like the friend she remembered.

Ever since realizing her interest I'd been paying him close attention, and it hadn't taken long for me to

form a less than favorable opinion. A man who repeatedly brushed servants off, snubbed women,

ignored members of the court as they tried to converse with him, and often paused to stare at his

reflection in the garden fountain was the last man I wanted for my sister.

I bit my lip to suppress these observations so as not to upset Rosemarie any further and wrapped a

comforting arm around her to draw her close. She rested her head on my shoulder in the way she'd

done ever since we were young, and in this position we remained until my spellbook—which had

faithfully followed me to the fountain—gave me a gentle nudge, a reminder I had work to do.

The movement caught Rosemarie's attention and she looked up. "My apologies, I'm distracting

you from your studies."

"You're far more important than my studies."

She gave me a *look*. "I know how much your apprenticeship means to you; you've spoken too

frequently of your dreams of becoming an enchantress."

That ever-present longing swelled, bringing with it memories of Mother—with her kindness,

constant bright smile, and the light that seemed to surround her whenever she performed her magic

and created joy, a light that had felt almost entirely extinguished ever since her passing.

Upon realizing I'd inherited her gift, Mother had been the one who'd encouraged my dreams and

taught me my first spells. Thus, magic always made me think not only of her, but of beauty and light,

an opportunity to bring joy to others and transform the ordinary into something extraordinary. I could

think of no greater calling, and thus spent countless hours day and night studying beneath Enchantress

Ivy in hopes of one day following in Mother's footsteps, not just to become an enchantress, but to

serve as the Royal Enchantress as she'd done.

But even magic, as wonderful as it was, couldn't compare to how I felt about my sister. I wouldn't

leave her until I knew she was well. I studied her expression carefully, but she seemed to have

cheered up.

Her brow puckered as she took in the garden. "Where's Enchantress Ivy?"

"Still meeting with the King's Council, likely deep in discussion about the pressing ogre

problem." Such weekly meetings were the duty of the Royal Enchantress. This political involvement

was the only thing I wasn’t looking forward to in my future role, especially since I’d one day be

serving with Prince Gladen when the time came for him to inherit the crown.

Rosemarie considered this impending arrangement most fortunate, while I viewed it as the worst

sort of luck. The prince was like any other royal—vain and lazy, and would thus need his hand held in

every important decision affecting the kingdom, which would pull me away from the magical duties

that actually mattered. I wanted to be an enchantress who brought light and joy to others, not serve as

a royal babysitter.

My spellbook interrupted my melancholy with another nudge, this one more poking and impatient

than the last. An enchanted object couldn’t realize that family loyalty was of far greater importance

than the healing spell I was supposed to be creating.

But perhaps I’d been neglecting my work for too long, especially considering Rosemarie seemed

well. I gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze before standing. She smiled. “Thank you for comforting

me. I’ll let you get back to studying. I know you have an exam coming up and how important it is to

you that you do well.”

The mere mention of my upcoming exam in one month’s time caused nerves to prickle my skin, but

I forced myself to push away the worries that had haunted my thoughts for weeks. I was more than

prepared. I’d spent hours immersed in every book of magic I could find and was now practicing the

spells I expected Enchantress Ivy to test me on during the practical portion of the test.

But the task was proving difficult when I constantly found myself several ingredients short, hence

I couldn’t miss the opportunity to accompany Enchantress Ivy to the palace in order to explore the

royal grounds and their array of plants, different from the ones I normally foraged in the forest behind

our cottage. Nothing less would have motivated me to venture here and risk another unpleasant

interaction with the prince.

“I’m still in need of the root of a royal fern, which I don’t think can be found on the palace

grounds, as vast as they are.” My gaze scanned the garden, a vision of shady alcoves, patchworks of

flowers, and pebbled paths, without a leafy fern in sight.

I saw more than the artistic landscaping: each bunch of clover, herb, and flower possessed

magical properties, and when combined in just the right manner unlocked wondrous spells. I longed

to discover all their secrets, to become the enchantress Mother always knew I could be. I wouldn't

cease studying until I reached that goal.

I forced myself to set aside thoughts of these dreams and to focus once more on my sister, needing

to assure myself she was indeed well before I resumed my studies. Though considerably calmer, she

suddenly appeared nervous once more.

I followed her gaze towards the adjoining garden where we'd left His Highness on the arm of his

intended. Through the arched entrance we could see he now strolled by himself. Hope brightened her

expression. "He's alone. Perhaps I finally have the chance to speak with him. Oh, I hope he

remembers me."

"Don't get your hopes up," I reminded her gently, but she was too busy examining her reflection in

the fountain's clear water to hear me.

She smoothed back a stray hair and straightened her dress before casting me an anxious glance.

"How do I look?"

I debated an array of responses to remind her that her appearance or even her shared history with

the prince didn't matter compared to the contracts that held him bound, but her green eyes—the only

feature we both shared with our departed mother—were so bright with hope I didn't have the heart to

dissuade her.

Perhaps this would be good for Rosemarie, a chance to overcome her painful shyness so she'd

have the courage to speak with the *right* man when he came along. An innocent interaction with the

prince wouldn't hurt; for all his faults, surely he'd be gracious towards her…

"You're lovely, as always." I hooked my arm through hers and gently led her to the garden

entrance, which we peered through.

There was no sign of the strolling prince or the simpering woman he was courting. I scanned up

and down the pathways with a frown before my gaze settled on one of the wrought-iron benches along

the hedgerow…where the prince sat, *reading*.

For a moment I simply gaped. Not only was His Highness engaging in a rather unexpected past

time for a man of his position, but his expression had softened from his usual pompous air to one of

contemplation. The sight so startled me that I missed Rosemarie's excited whisper.

"What was that?" I asked distractedly as I continued studying the prince, even tilting my head in

an attempt to read the title of his book. I couldn't help but be curious: what subject would have His

Highness so engrossed, his eyes bright, and with his bangs half hanging over his eyes in an annoyingly

endearing way?

"I'm going to speak to him."

At Rosemarie's declaration, I forced myself to tear my bewildered attention away and watch as

she slowly approached the prince. At the sound of her footsteps he looked up and hastily closed his

book, as if embarrassed to have been caught with it. He stood, dislodging the book from his lap so

that it fell into the dirt.

He muttered a foul curse that caused Rosemarie to freeze. The prince didn't even warrant her a

glance as he stooped down to retrieve his book, meticulously brushing off the dirt that had gotten on

the brown leather cover.

"Can I never get a moment to myself?" he muttered before glancing up with a cold look, no sign of

recognition for his childhood playmate. "Can I help you?" he asked stiffly.

Rosemarie's cheeks pinked. "I—" Her nerves fully overcame her, robbing her of her voice and

leaving her staring mutely.

Prince Gladen waited a moment before heaving a rather impatient sigh and returning his attention

to his book, carefully turning it over and over to survey any damage. “This book has been in the royal

library for centuries and is very valuable…and you’ve ruined it, just to get my attention.” His manner

was hardened when his gaze next met my sister’s. “I’m in no mood for this today. If you have nothing

further to say, I’d appreciate it if you left.”

My fists tightened at the devastation filling Rosemarie’s eyes, all hopes of rekindling her

childhood friendship with the prince dashed. I wanted nothing more than to have fully grown into my

powers so I could use my magic to stop this scene from unfolding—to rob the prince of his cruel

words, to turn back time, *anything* to prevent the heartache overshadowing my dear sister’s

expression.

But I was powerless to do anything. What good was magic if I couldn’t use it to protect my sister?

I watched in frustration as the prince turned away, dismissing Rosemarie without another word.

She stared at his back for a long moment before her shoulders crumpled and she turned to slowly

walk away. At the sight of the tears glistening in her eyes my anger surged, hot and burning. I stormed

from my hiding place to gather her in my arms.

“Oh Rosemarie, are you alright?”

She nestled against me with a heartbreaking whimper. “It was awful, Astrid. He didn’t even

recognize me, I couldn’t speak at all, and I ruined his book—”

“Who cares about his book.” What sort of man cared more for leather and parchment than

common courtesy? “He’s a rude, pompous, arrogant…”

Harsher and more colorful phrases I’d heard from some of the potion apprentices during difficult

training sessions crowded my mind, but they were too much for my sister’s delicate sentiments, so I

forced myself to keep them at bay. Ideas for spells to curse him with quickly followed, seductively

stoking the anger surging through me, urging me to give that prince a piece of my mind.

I paused in rubbing Rosemarie’s back and released her. “Where are you going?” she stuttered.

“I have an important matter to tend to.” I snatched my spellbook still floating beside me and

stomped after His Highness, holding my book close like a shield, one that did little to deflect my fury.

Prince Gladen was now sitting on another bench further into the garden with his book. He glanced

up at the sound of my approach with a look like he meant to snap at me too…but when he saw who I

was he wisely held his tongue.

I smirked; those who possessed magic always garnered respect, even from royalty. There was

great advantage in the unspoken threat that one could be turned into a frog or something far worse if

they weren't polite enough, a fact the prince well knew if his forced smile was any indication.

"Enchantress Astrid." He stood for the proper bow in greeting, but I was too angry to extend a

curtsy in return. He waited for it a moment before clearing his throat. "What a pleasant surprise to see

you."

By his sour expression he didn't consider it such; he was still scowling at his book. His frown

deepened when he noticed another dirt smudge, and he used the hem of his velvet shirt to wipe it

away.

The angle allowed me to finally read the title and my eyebrows lifted in surprise: it was a book

on astronomy. Why was the prince studying such a subject?

He noticed my attention and hastily flipped the book so the title faced away from me. "Is there

something I can do for you, Enchantress Astrid?" He flashed another smile, this one less forced and

rather charming.

I gave my head a rigid shake; I refused to be swayed by his charm. I slowly approached, pausing

when I was mere inches away, close enough for him to feel the heat of my glare. His charming grin

that had undoubtedly broken dozens of women's hearts faltered.

He shifted a bit nervously. "To what do I owe the pleasure of a beautiful woman's attention?"

I rolled my eyes. "There's no need for empty flattery, especially from a man who also uses his

words to hurt others over a slight towards a mere book."

His gaze flickered between me, his book, and Rosemarie standing at the other end of the garden,

watching anxiously. I waited for a flash of recognition to fill his eyes as he watched my sister but

none came, which only stoked my anger.

"Well, she did cause me to drop it…" As if that excused anything. "It's a rather old and rare

volume—"

"Does such a thing truly matter?" I snapped. "She only wanted to speak to you and was instead

treated with contempt."

“If speaking with me was truly her intention, she did very little talking.”

“She’s simply shy.”

He sighed wearily. “And I’m afraid after the morning I’ve had, I have very little patience. There

are just too many women who fancy themselves in love with me for me to make the time to humor

their sentiments. I’m a very busy man.”

I nearly snorted. “Oh you poor, poor prince. That must be so trying for you.”

His eyebrows lifted at my rudeness, something I doubted had ever been directed towards him

before, but I was too angry to care should word of this get back to Enchantress Ivy.

My conscience whispered the unnecessary reminder that one day I’d be forced to work with the

pompous prince once I became the Royal Enchantress and he the king, but none of that mattered in the

heat of this moment. Nothing could quell the magic sparking beneath my fingertips, making me feel

powerful, while my fierce love for my sister intensified my fury.

He studied my scowl a moment before he pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose with a

weary sigh, as if warding off a headache. “It *is* rather trying. You have no idea.”

If he thought he could earn my sympathies, then he was a bigger fool than I initially thought. The

burning pressing against my chest only escalated the longer our interaction extended. I fought to keep

the magic simmering beneath my skin at bay, my mood too dark and my powers too temperamental to

withstand the temptation to use them against this sniveling prince—yet sparks flew from my fingertips

anyway, capturing his weary attention.

“Ah, is that a warning?”

I straightened to my full height, one that was barely taller than his shoulders, and thus the effect

wasn’t as intimidating as I’d like. “Perhaps.” I used a tone that dared him to cross me further, but he

only grinned mischievously.

“Hmm, you seem rather prickly to be a poised enchantress. Are you going to turn me into a frog?”

He snorted at the thought.

Was it obvious how sorely I wanted to do just that? “Don’t tempt me.” Nevermind that human

transformations were still beyond my current training; *he* didn’t have to know that.

“That might prove interesting…and even useful if it keeps clinging females at bay, though there is

the unfortunate side effect that it'd be difficult to read. The inconvenience might prove worth it for the

experience I'd gain from the experiment; I've always wanted to learn more about magic." His gaze

lowered to the spellbook I clutched against my pounding heart.

I shielded it from view. "Absolutely not."

Defiance filled his eyes—which were a rather dark, beautiful blue, not that I would humor the

prince by being yet another female who noticed—as if he meant to order me to hand it over. But

despite his arrogance and ill humor, he at least had the sense not to argue with an enchantress, even

one who had feigned being more powerful than she actually was.

"I suppose it'd be wise of me to remain in your good graces so you'll be more likely to humor me

in the future should I come to you with a request." He tapped his lips thoughtfully. "Let's see…a spell

of invisibility would be just the thing to avoid all manner of women—annoying ones, shy ones, and

especially the *angry ones*."

He gave me a pointed look at his mention of the latter.

"Oh, you wouldn't want that, Your Highness," I said with false sweetness. "If you were invisible,

then you couldn't see your reflection in the mirror every time you gloat at it."

He pursed his lips thoughtfully, as if this was a valid concern, and I nearly snorted at his vanity.

His mischievous look returned. “The sacrifice would be well worth it if such a spell would grant

me the opportunity to read without interruptions, which tend to be far too frequent for my liking.”

Though his tone was teasing, his eyes were serious, as if he truly meant his quip. “Now, if there’s

nothing I can help you with, I’d appreciate it if you’d excuse me.”

He bowed and departed the gardens with a cheerful whistle, leaving me staring after him. The

interaction had done nothing to lessen my annoyance; if anything it had only grown, distracting me so

thoroughly that I scarcely heard Rosemarie’s approach.

“He spent more time talking to you than he had with me,” she said in a small voice.

I silently cursed myself for allowing my interaction with the prince to play out while my sister

watched from the edge of the garden. “Trust me, the conversation was anything but cordial. He finds

me lacking and wasted no time in telling me so.” A small fib, but well worth it if it’d put my sister at

ease.

Her eyes widened. “But how could he? You’re so beautiful.”

I was quite beautiful, but such things mattered little. I tossed my long, golden hair over my

shoulder before wrapping my arm back around my sister. “As are you, not to mention your history

with him should have garnered much more kindness, which just goes to show that Prince Gladen is

too foolish for either of us, especially you, the most deserving woman I know.”

The shadow of a smile tugged on Rosemarie’s lips before her expression wavered. “I still can’t

believe he’s forgotten me.”

My anger grew, once more begging for release. “Because he’s a scoundrel. Thus, I hope you put

him out of your mind forever. You deserve far better.”

I felt slightly guilty for destroying her romantic dreams, but in this instance duty required it; I

refused to allow His Highness to hold any more power over my sister’s fragile emotions.

She bit her lip. “No, he’s not. Perhaps he was right to dismiss me.” Rosemarie’s voice wavered,

her gaze fixated on the cobblestones. “I’m the one who first stopped spending time with him,

something that must have deeply hurt him. Thus I’m not worth his attention.”

My heart broke, the only emotion warring with my churning fury. My sister was too delicate to

have been forced to endure such treatment from Prince Gladen. I glared towards the gate where he'd

disappeared. I'd make him pay for the heartbreak he'd caused my sister if it was the last thing I did.

C H A P T E R 2

I t was impossible to concentrate with the worry shrouding me as I cast repeated glances

towards my sister. She perched in the nearby window seat in the cozy two-bedroom

cottage we shared with Enchantress Ivy. Ivy had been Mother's apprentice, so the

position of Royal Enchantress had been passed to her with Mother's death three years before.

Rosemarie sat with her legs curled up beneath her and a book in her lap, one that remained unread

as she stared unseeing out the window overlooking the royal grounds, the same position she'd been in

all week. Her melancholy was such a contrast to her usual cheerfulness, and I hated seeing her in such

a state.

Whenever my sister found herself in one of her somber moods, she had the tendency to remain

nearby anytime she wasn't working in the village, unable to bear being alone with her dark thoughts.

And while I welcomed her company, in this instance my concern only proved a distraction.

Normally it only took Rosemarie a few days to recover from her disappointments, but this one

showed no signs of ending anytime soon; I hadn't seen her in such a state since our mother's death.

Apparently, her feelings for the prince had been deeper than I'd originally thought. I wondered if she

associated the loss of the prince's friendship with the loss of Father; perhaps the resurfaced memories

and emotions might explain why she was taking His Highness's rejection so hard.

My anger towards him grew as I cast her several anxious glances while I worked, my chest

tightening as I studied the sadness marring her expression, one which became more acute with each

passing day. My sister was gradually slipping away, a thought which caused my heart to wrench.

"Astrid?" At the sound of my mentor's voice I turned away from my sister to find Enchantress Ivy

waiting expectantly, her hand extended. "The unicorn tears?"

Of course, I was supposed to be assisting her with her current spell. My shaking hands nearly

caused me to drop the potion vial as I handed it to Ivy. I caught a glimpse of her raised eyebrows

before I turned away and began hastily chopping the vervain, the next ingredient for the charm. I felt

her watchful stare as I finished my chopping and gathered the minced purple flowers to add to the

brew bubbling in the cauldron over the hearth, only pausing at Ivy's gentle touch.

"The vervain isn't added until the unicorn tears have steeped for three minutes."

My cheeks burned at the mistake, one of many I'd made in the week following what had transpired

with the prince in the gardens. But how could I concentrate? As much as I loved my magic studies and

the hours spent helping Enchantress Ivy with her spells, it all seemed inconsequential compared to my

sister's breaking heart, something I'd only become more protective of since our parents' passing.

My gaze darted towards Rosemarie again, only to find her looking not mindlessly out the window

but at me, her forehead puckered with concern.

"Are you alright, Astrid?" Her glassy eyes widened, a silent plea for me to be well.

"Of course," I lied. "There's no need to worry about me." The last thing I wanted was for my

well-being to weigh on her heart, already in a fragile state after Prince Gladen's cruel rejection. The

heat of Ivy's gaze prickled the back of my neck, and I knew she at least had detected my lie.

“I know much is weighing on your mind,” she said. “But you must do your best to focus. These are

no ordinary spells—they’re for Prince Gladen’s upcoming engagement party and thus must be our best

work. Nothing less for His Highness.”

From her perch in the corner I heard Rosemarie’s breath hook and I stiffened. *Oh no*…I risked an

anxious glance towards her to find her face white with shock and her eyes shiny with unshed tears.

“The prince is soon to be engaged?” she asked in a wavering voice.

Enchantress Ivy hesitated. “The match has been in the works between the kingdoms of Rosileya

and Analasia for several months. The engagement will be made official at the ball held in two weeks’

time. As the Royal Enchantress, I’ve been tasked with creating a magical performance for His

Highness and his guests’ entertainment.”

Rosemarie stared blankly at her before her gaze darted towards me. I sensed her unspoken

question, one I didn’t have the heart to answer. While Rosemarie’s work in the village kept her away

from many of the goings-on at the palace, because of how closely Enchantress Ivy and I worked with

the royal family, I’d of course known about the prince’s upcoming arrangement for quite some time.

Perhaps it’d been wrong to keep it from my sister how close the prince had been to making his

upcoming union official, but at the time I’d only thought of protecting her and her fragile dreams, as

foolish as those dreams were. Though I’d suspected she’d inevitably encounter the prince and

discover what type of man he truly was, or learn of his impending engagement, I’d foolishly hoped

both had occurred in a less traumatic way.

Rosemarie said nothing at my reluctant nod, but I could sense her heartache as Enchantress Ivy

began discussing the spells we were preparing in greater detail—the enchanted effects for the

decorations, the show of magical lights, and the magical orchestra we’d prepared in the flowers that

would waltz throughout the room as the prince danced with his intended. All the best for a man who

believed he thoroughly deserved it, of course.

I scarcely heard the enchantress’s stream of conversation, my attention riveted to my dear sister. I

ached to know what she was thinking. Clearly her heart was breaking, so caught up in her infatuation

that the news of the prince’s upcoming marriage was too difficult for her tender emotions to bear. It’d

been the sole reason I’d been purposefully vague about what I’d been assisting Ivy with this week.

Ivy paused long enough to look up from her work to take in our expressions—Rosemarie's teary

one and my hardened one. Understanding softened her own before she cast her gaze across the table

laden with jars of ingredients. "It appears we're in need of more dragon's breath."

I mutely started for the stairs that led to the damp storeroom but paused at her gentle touch on my

arm.

"I'll retrieve it." She left without another word, leaving me and my sister alone…and with a

chance to talk.

The silence seemed heavier without Ivy's soothing presence. I cast a wary glance towards

Rosemarie, who looked…unnaturally calm, a countenance I was certain was only a façade to the pain

encasing her soft heart.

"Rose…" I began, before she hastily spoke over me.

"You needn't worry," she assured me. "My feelings aren't so fragile as to need protecting."

I frowned, unconvinced. "But aren't you upset about Prince Gladen's upcoming engagement?"

Though I privately considered the prince unworthy of her regard, I still cared for her own fragile

feelings.

“Of course not,” she said. “I’m happy for His Highness. Such a wonderful man deserves nothing

less than a princess.”

The man deserved something far different than a princess. The desire for revenge that had been

simmering in my heart all week returned, stronger than ever. “He hurt you.”

“I’m sure his dismissal of me wasn’t rudeness, but his being faithful to his intended. He likely

didn’t even recognize me.”

I stiffened my jaw. Even if his actions had stemmed from loyalty—which I highly doubted—he

could have dissuaded Rosemarie’s affections far more kindly.

“Rose—” I began again, but she continued talking, her words coming out more rapidly, as if in a

rush to get them out before her emotions unraveled completely.

“Even if he weren’t nearly engaged I don’t deserve him. Despite our history, who am I to think—”

Her lip trembled before she lifted her chin in an attempt at bravery she likely didn’t feel. “It’s better

this way. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to be alone.”

And blinking back tears, she hurried from the room, leaving me staring after her.

I GAVE my sister an hour to herself before my relentless worry compelled me to check on her. I peered

tentatively into the room we shared and found her slumped in front of the vanity staring gloomily at

her reflection. She fiddled with her hair and gave her cheeks a pinch to encourage more color into

them before pausing to study the effect, only to heave a dejected sigh.

“No wonder he didn’t want me.”

The anger that had been a constant companion since the incident in the gardens emerged anew.

Prince Gladen had done this to her.

Rosemarie noticed my reflection in the glass and swiveled around with a forced smile that didn’t

reach her eyes. “Hello, Astrid.”

“Hello.” It was an effort to sound cheery. I crossed the threshold and settled on the edge of the

bed near her. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m well.”

Unconvinced, I gave her a *look*, and her expression faltered.

“I suppose I’ve been…better. He used to be such a good friend. Is it silly to feel so

disappointed?”

“Of course not.” I took a steadying breath in an attempt to quell the poisonous emotions seeping

over me, which would do nothing to heal the wound afflicting my sister’s heart. I tended to become

quite impulsive when I allowed my anger to get the better of me, but now was not the time for such

things, especially when the prince wasn't worth any more of my consideration.

Yet it didn't immediately fade. My hands curled into fists, needing an outlet for the emotion

swirling within me. *Keep control of your temper*. But despite my best intentions to quell it, the fire

swelling my heart only flared, aching to escape.

It hadn't been this strong since the afternoon two years before when one of the potion master's

apprentices had *accidentally* added an ingredient to the newest apprentice's hair shining tonic to dye

it purple. In return I'd *accidentally* set fire to his notes, and had taken great satisfaction when their

loss had caused him to fail his next exam. But rather than dwell on that satisfaction, I now firmly

reminded myself of the remorse I'd felt later when I saw his devastation over the failure.

I returned my attention to Rosemarie, the effort to cheer her up the perfect distraction. "How about

you and I pick berries and bake them into a pie?"

My mind filled with warm childhood memories of the afternoons we'd spent doing that very thing

—our fingers becoming stained from berry juice as we held contests to see who could pick the most

the fastest, before returning to the cottage to help Mother bake them into pies, which we ate while

curled in Father's lap as he recounted stories around the hearth. My heart twinged in longing for those

evenings.

Rosemarie released a sad breath. "The prince and I used to pick berries together."

Drat, I'd forgotten that had been one of the activities Rosemarie had done with Prince Gladen

during the many afternoons they'd spent exploring the surrounding forest as children. I grimaced,

frustrated I'd been the one to delve up the reminder.

I nibbled my lip, deliberating, before another idea lit my mind. I knew just the thing to cheer her

up. I curled my magic against my palm, and with a flick of my wrist caused it to rain down in a stream

of glitter and light, a trick that had never failed to make Rosemarie smile. But her somber expression

barely changed, causing my panic to rise. It had been years since she'd been this down, not since…

I hastily pushed all thoughts of our parents' deaths aside to focus on my sister. If only there was a

spell I could use to heal her broken heart, but I knew of none. I had to do *something* to help her…but

what?

“Please put His Highness out of your mind; you’re far too good for him.”

Her sigh was heavy. “That’s simply a kind way of telling me I’m not good enough for him…which

is the truth. He’s a royal, and I’m nothing more than the daughter of an enchantress. Who am I

compared to him?”

“You’re the daughter of not just any enchantress, but one of the most talented enchantresses the

kingdom of Rosileya has seen in centuries,” I reminded her.

The shadow of a smile caressed her lips. “Footsteps I have no doubt you’ll follow.”

My worn book of magic gave an impatient wriggle as I hugged it close to my chest. For a moment

I forgot my grudge against the prince as I allowed my thoughts to fill with the dreams I’d harbored for

as long as I could remember—the spells I would learn, the people I could help, the fame I’d receive,

the advice I’d give the king after I completed my training…

…a king who’d unfortunately be the prince I now despised. My temper once more flared. Such a

self-centered prince who cared so little for his people would be nothing less than a tyrant when it

came time for him to rule. His arrogance and rudeness needed to be taken down a notch before he

became king, and I was just the person to help him learn his lesson.

These dark thoughts slithered into my daydreams of my future role, causing their light to fade into

shadow. The vision gradually shifted and I envisioned myself not only as a powerful enchantress

helping those in need, but using my powers to bring about justice by accessing an arsenal of spells I'd

never previously studied.

My breath caught as an idea suddenly blossomed to life. At first my sense tried to suppress it, but

after an internal battle, my anger emerged triumphant, quickly seducing my good sense.

"What is it, Astrid?" Rosemarie asked halfheartedly, her attention still clearly on her broken

heart.

I didn't answer, my mind eclipsed with nourishing my epiphany drop by drop. Perhaps there *was*

a spell I could use, an enchantment from an area of magic I'd never studied. My fingers tingled as my

magic pinpricked my fingertips, itching to access these spells.

"I have an idea," I said. "I need to return to my studies. Will you be alright to be alone for a

while?"

She nodded distractedly before turning away to settle her gaze on the vase on her nightstand,

which contained a single rose, one that had likely been taken from the very rose garden where Prince

Gladen had broken her heart. I gritted my teeth at the sight of it. Rosemarie had a tendency towards

the dramatic—she'd undoubtedly plucked it as a reminder of the pain she'd experienced in that very

garden, a fitting token for a poetic martyr.

Dear Rosemarie.

The sight of the rose only solidified my determination. I kissed my sister's cheek and hurriedly

made my way from the room and down the rickety stairs to Enchantress Ivy's private quarters, my

faithful magic book trailing close behind with a rather dejected slump, annoyed I was seeking wisdom

outside its own pages. But the spell I needed was far beyond the abilities of my faithful companion. I

wasn't entirely sure whether the books I needed could be found within her vast library, but I wouldn't

know unless I looked.

Luck was on my side, for my mentor was absent, likely on an errand for the king, an absence

which allowed me to conduct my forbidden search without her unwanted questions. I tried to ignore

the twinge of guilt prickling my conscience that my plans even warranted such secrecy.

I entered the practice room where I usually studied and wove around the table piled high with

books, quill, and parchment crowded with scribbled notes, the half-completed task Enchantress Ivy

had bid me to do earlier this morning, but from which my worry for my sister had distracted me.

From this room I slipped into the abandoned corridor that twisted its way to the library, crammed

with shelves sunken beneath the weight of hundreds of books. I scanned the faded spines, searching,

but none of these magical tomes were what I was looking for. Yet I wasn't deterred. The prince

needed to be taught a lesson, else he'd only continue to treat others poorly, and as one of the only

wielders of magic in the kingdom, I had to be the one to do it. For Rosemarie…and the kingdom.

Time crawled by as I continued perusing the shelves. Still nothing. I slumped wearily against the

shelf, defeated. If I couldn't find what I was searching for, how would I ever get the justice I so

desperately sought?

I set my jaw. No matter the obstacles or how long it took, I would do whatever it took to teach the

prince a lesson that would benefit him and the kingdom during his future reign, I'd be certain of that.

My determination compelled me to search the shelves again, this time much more carefully. I

combed over every book, even opening several to scan their contents. Still nothing. I shoved the last

book onto the shelf with a dejected sigh before my gaze darted towards the door at the end of the

library, one that blended seamlessly into the wall.

I nibbled my lip, hesitant. Enchantress Ivy had shown me her secret room only once, and while

she hadn't exactly *forbidden* me to enter, I knew it was highly discouraged considering my magic

vows to only use my powers for good. The books that room contained were not only magic beyond

my current skill level…but ones far darker than either Ivy or I practiced.

Yet perhaps it was only darker magic that could provide what I most craved.

I lit a candle and made my way to the door. An ominous creak pierced the air as I pushed it open

to reveal a set of stairs descending into darkness. With a steadying breath I made my way down, each

creaking step causing a cloud of dust to rise up as I descended lower and lower. My spellbook

followed me down, shivering as we went.

The air was heavy with neglect, a sign it'd been years since anyone had ventured down here. I

wasn’t surprised; Enchantress Ivy solely used her powers for good, and thus wouldn’t need any of the

enchantments these locked away books contained…and yet I was seeking them out.

Guilt prickled my heart, causing me to hesitate on the bottom step. Each step closer to this

forbidden room was one step away from the path Mother and Enchantress Ivy had taught me to always

follow. Was I doing the right thing in venturing here now?

I forced myself to push away these disquieting doubts. This had to be done, for Prince Gladen

couldn’t be allowed to treat his future subjects in such a way. This thought compelled me to take the

final step into the abandoned room, shrouded in dust and cobwebs and containing a single bookcase.

One glance at the volumes filling the shelves revealed they were exactly what I was looking for:

curses. My lips curled into a satisfied smile. Excellent.

I scanned the selection before my gaze settled on *Basic Curses*, just the volume I needed for my

still-budding powers. I brushed away my spellbook’s attempt to nudge my hand away and curled my

fingers around the spine to tug it from the shelf with another cloud of dust. The book felt heavy in my

hand, while its faded leather left an unsettling feeling against my skin.

I struggled to ignore the sensation as I opened the book and flipped through its pages. Despite

being basic curses, most of the spells were too dark, even for a conceited jerk like the prince. I didn't

want to harm him, per se…though in truth I wasn't exactly certain *what* I wanted, only to teach him a

much-needed lesson. I was certain I'd recognize the appropriate punishment the moment I saw it.

I paused on a page containing a faded spell and brought the faint, flickering candlelight closer.

Written at the top in spidery black scrawl were the words: *To Take on the Appearance of One's*

Heart.

My own heart beat rapidly as I read through the spell. Casting this curse on the prince would

transform his outward appearance to match the state of his cold heart and disfigure his handsome

features, which would damage his pride and provide him some much-needed humility. I couldn't have

chosen a more perfect curse if I'd created one myself.

My elation faltered as I more closely studied the spell. I worried my lip. Even for a supposedly

basic curse, it was rather advanced; I'd never worked with magic that required so many steps, most

of which were beyond my current abilities.

I straightened my shoulders. I would learn. Like Mother before me, I had a gift for magic, not to

mention fierce determination. I would dedicate as many hours of study as I needed. Such time would

be difficult to come by with how much of it was occupied by my apprenticeship to Enchantress Ivy

and studying for my upcoming exam, but the effort would be well worth it.

I stiffened as the sound of footsteps echoed from the library above: someone was coming. I tore

the spell from the book—nothing a simple repair spell couldn't fix when I'd finished with it—and

hastily shoved the book back into the dusty shelf. I'd no sooner tucked the curse into my own

spellbook—which it only accepted with great reluctance after a wrestle for me to open it and slip it

inside—than the footsteps paused at the top of the stairs.

"What are you doing, Astrid?"

Enchantress Ivy stood at the top of the stairs, shrouded in light and magic, which both seemed

almost blinding after my eyes had grown accustomed to the shadowy room. For a moment I stared at

her in wonder, for she reminded me so much of Mother—talented, loving, and with a gentle way

about her, even when wearing a look of disapproval, as she did now.

I hastened up the steps. She stepped aside when I reached the top to allow me to slip past into the

brighter main library before looking down at the forbidden bookshelf at the base of the stairs. My

heart hammered wildly as her suspicious gaze flickered towards me. Could she sense the curse I'd

hastily hidden away?

I shifted nervously as she shut the door behind me and faced me. "I expected to find you immersed

in your studies, not wandering places you shouldn't."

She said nothing more, but further words weren't needed, not with the disappointment shadowing

her eyes. Shame burned my cheeks: not only had I been caught somewhere I shouldn't have been, but I

hadn't been doing what I should have been doing. I didn't want her to have any reason to be

disappointed in me.

"I've been…distracted."

"Indeed." Her tone, while disapproving, remained kind. I'd almost have preferred if she'd yelled

at me, but anger wasn't her way.

Her attention returned to the closed door before she motioned me to one of the chairs. I perched

nervously on the edge of the seat and waited.

“Is your sister’s heart still aching?”

I frowned, surprised by her choice of topic, before managing a stiff nod.

“Love is the most powerful emotion in the world, but while love can be beautiful, it can also

cause one to act in ways one normally wouldn’t. You mustn’t allow it to sway you to do anything that

is less than honorable.”

“What do you mean?” I stuttered.

“You love your sister dearly, and thus her pain becomes your own, but no good comes from

harboring a grudge. Lack of forgiveness creates a poison, but unlike most poisons, this one isn’t

administered to the one who caused it, but to the creator themselves; its only antidote is forgiveness.

Don’t allow it to taint your heart.”

My discomfort deepened, and not for the first time I wondered if Enchantress Ivy had the ability to

peer into my heart and read all the emotions it contained. But as unpleasant as her clear disapproval

was, it wasn’t enough to steer me from my chosen course, one I had no doubt was the right one.

I jolted as Enchantress Ivy rested a gentle hand on my arm, a touch that caused me to miss my

mother fiercely. I hastily blinked away the tears burning my eyes. She wasn’t here, nor was Father.

All I had was Rosemarie, giving me greater motivation to protect her in any way that I could, no

matter the cost.

As if she'd sensed my unwavering decision, Ivy frowned. "Remember: magic is both a gift and a

responsibility, one that must only be used for good. You possess great capacity, not only for your

powers to grow, but to use them in ways that create light. Don't venture even a single step down the

path you're considering, for taking one will only tempt you into taking another." She leaned in a little,

waiting for me to look her in the eye before she continued, her words deliberate. "Turn your back to

such a path and instead choose the road to healing, for time heals even the most broken or hardened of

hearts."

With those words she rose and left the library, leaving me alone with her counsel, which seemed

to linger in the air, causing my doubts to return before my anger resolutely pushed them away.

Though Enchantress Ivy was wise, she was wrong in this instance. I wasn't choosing a path of

darkness, but of justice. Besides, it was only one spell, one I'd chosen for the most noble of causes:

to protect my dearest sister and ensure the prince never hurt another in a similar way ever again.

But despite my attempts to rationalize my decision, I was still left feeling uneasy, a feeling which

only deepened as I plucked my faithful spellbook from the air and turned to the curse harbored within.

The book fought back and repeatedly closed on me until I wrestled to keep the wanted page exposed.

My skin tingled as my hand curled around the worn parchment and I tucked it away in my apron

pocket, within easy access for me to study it thoroughly.

What good was having magic if I couldn't use it to help those I loved most?

C H A P T E R 3

T he lantern's golden light flickered across the faded parchment as I read it once more, a

task made more difficult by the heavy exhaustion muddling my senses. The only sound

came from the crackling fire and the agitated rustling of my faithful spellbook's pages

as it moodily floated around the room, having lost another of its battles in trying to dissuade me from

my chosen course.

Though I'd studied the curse so thoroughly I now had it memorized, I still slowly went over it

again, ensuring I'd accurately performed all the steps. I'd spent nearly every night these past two

weeks studying the spell, often into the early hours of the morning, driven by the looming deadline of

Prince Gladen's upcoming engagement ball. After hours of study and preparation I was finally ready.

Tonight would be the perfect moment to finally cast the curse. I drew the curtains back to peer out

into the night, where storm clouds had gathered, thick and ominous, the perfect element for my spell.

Magic was comprised of many components: an enchantress's natural ability, the level of skill

brought by her years of study, and the words or potions that made up a spell. But it was also

influenced by the world around it—not just the ingredients that comprised it, but other elements such

as light and darkness, the weather, even the emotions of the caster.

My anger towards the prince would lend the spell power, but an enchantment of this nature would

need further strength, which could only come by being performed not only during the darkness of night

but during a storm. The arrival of one on the night I was to cast my curse felt like providence,

assuring me I was on the right path and justifying my decision to perform a spell I'd previously never

dreamed I'd ever cast.

I opened the window to allow the darkness to tumble in and surround the cauldron bubbling on the

hearth. Though the storm outside hadn’t yet begun, I could smell the approaching rain and feel the

increase in the wind, both of which would lend their powers to my curse when the time came to cast

it.

I’d prepared all the ingredients during my long nights of study. I uncorked each vial and poured

them into the simmering cauldron, which bubbled and changed colors with each addition. Between

every step, I meticulously stirred the brew according to the spell’s instructions and ensured the

roaring fire was the correct temperature. Everything had to be perfect.

While advanced enchantresses could cast their spell without first brewing it and imparting it onto

an object, this step was necessary for my skill level, for most of my magic still needed a foundation in

order to succeed. Not just any base would do, so I’d chosen mine carefully: Rosemarie’s rose.

I held it up by its stem, taking in its vibrant crimson color, now enchanted to always remain in full

bloom. It was strange how something of such beauty had become a symbol of my sister’s heartache

and would now be the vessel for such a dark spell. But there was also something poetic about the

irony, especially considering Prince Gladen’s own handsome appearance was nothing more than a

mask for a cold heart.

I would give Rosemarie a new flower for her nightstand and use this for my spell. Not only would

the longevity enchantment ensure the curse wouldn’t fade with time, but my poor sister’s heartache

had likely seeped into its petals. Because the curse was being performed in her honor, I hoped it too

would lend strength to my magic.

I carefully dipped it into the simmering cauldron, ensuring it was fully submerged. It glowed as

the crimson liquid completely coated the rose before the red light faded, leaving the flower exactly as

it’d looked before, with no hint of the curse hidden within.

I smirked. Perfect. Now all that was left to do was give it to its intended victim.

I took my cloak from the hook by the door, tucked the rose inside, and slipped out into the night. A

canopy of clouds had smothered the moon’s silvery light, making the darkness thick, which only

added to the ideal conditions for casting my curse.

Even with the faded light I knew my way around the royal grounds, having traversed this familiar

path to the palace many times before. My fingers grazed the tops of the flowers as I walked the

labyrinth of gardens. Their sweet perfume soon mingled with the scent of rain as the storm arrived;

each drop seeped into my skin to touch the magic simmering beneath, lending its strength for the spell

to come.

The guards standing outside the castle gate eyed me warily as I entered, but they made no move to

hinder my progression towards the castle. The sloping lawns opened to a cobblestone path that led up

a stone staircase to the towering oak front doors. Thunder rumbled in the sky and the rain fell more

heavily, urging me up the steps, each one bringing me closer to the prince and the much-needed lesson

I was about to teach him.

A sudden wave of apprehension trickled over me, causing me to slow near the top of the stairs.

No matter the reasons that had led me here, I'd never performed such magic before. Was I really

doing right thing?

"It's only one spell," I rationalized for the dozenth time. "One curse to teach that prince a lesson,

and then I'll never use my magic in such a way again."

But my unease lingered. Was even one curse one too many? Enchantress Ivy's earlier warning

returned: *It’s wise not to take a single step down the path you’re considering, for taking one will*

only tempt you into taking another. Turn your back on it now.

My apprehension increased, but I hastily shook off the unsettling feeling and gathered my resolve.

This path was necessary for the good of the kingdom; I was fulfilling my purpose as an enchantress by

using my magic to right a wrong and correct a flaw in the prince. What could be more noble?

My knock on the castle door was swallowed up by the gathering wind and rain, but moments later

a footman decked in royal livery opened the door and peered out, his eyes wide with surprise at

seeing a visitor at such a late hour.

They widened further in recognition. Though I wasn’t yet a full-fledged enchantress, those who

possessed magic were rare; this along with my future role as the Royal Enchantress granted me

respect.

He gaped for a moment, slowly taking in my appearance. Though my violet gown and golden hair

were both thoroughly soaked, my beauty and magic surrounded me like an aura, creating quite the

impression, one I hoped would grant me the favor I sought.

Sure enough, his cheeks went ruddy and he hastened into a flustered bow. “It’s an honor,

Enchantress Astrid. How may the king’s household serve you?”

Technically it was *Apprentice* Enchantress, but I liked the sound of my future title, so I made no

motion to correct him. “I request an audience with His Highness, Prince Gladen. I have a gift for him,

a spell prepared in honor of his impending engagement.”

The footman hesitated, for the hour was nearing midnight, but I hoped the status that came with my

powers would allow me this breach in royal protocol. The rumors of enchantresses using their magic

to enact revenge on those who displeased them would undoubtedly compel him to grant my

unconventional request. My stomach knotted at the grim realization that the actions I performed here

tonight would only add to those whispers.

The footman eyed my expression warily. “Of course,” he finally stammered. After another bow he

stepped aside to let me enter the palace, but I remained unmoving, afraid to step out of the storm and

darkness; I could already feel it lending power to my magic even before I’d cast the spell. Whatever

happened, it’d have to be done outside.

I lifted my chin. “I will meet with His Highness here.”

The footman hesitated again. It was one thing to call upon a royal far after receiving hours were

over, and quite another to force the prince to meet with his guest outside midst a storm. I didn't envy

his task in making the arrangements with His Highness and felt sorry for him, but unfortunately it was

a necessary part of my mission; I'd have to find a way to make it up to him when all of this was over.

"I will meet with His Highness here," I repeated firmly when the footman remained unmoving. I

narrowed my eyes in silent warning, nevermind I didn't know any curses other than the one I'd

painstakingly studied these past several weeks.

He finally thawed from his paralyzing uncertainty. "Of course." He bowed again and stepped into

the castle to retrieve the prince. I waited in the cold darkness, focusing on the feel of the wind and

each drop of rain, relishing the power they lent me and counting each raindrop, a measurement of the

time passing.

I expected I'd have to wait a long time for the lazy prince to arrive, but to my surprise he came

promptly, stepping out into the rain with little concern as to its effect on his velvet finery. I studied his

expression, expecting to find resentment for having his evening so rudely disrupted, but he didn't

appear annoyed. Instead he flashed a grin that was annoyingly charming and bowed over my hand.

“We meet again, Enchantress Astrid. To what do I owe this pleasure?”

It took me a moment to get over my fluster in order to find my voice. “Good evening, Your

Highness. I trust I haven’t interrupted anything?” Judging by his appearance, he’d likely been

attending a rather prestigious event.

“Only a formal dinner between me, my intended, and our families, but it’s no bother; I was hoping

for an excuse to leave early.”

Though his expression remained cheerful, an emotion briefly flashed in his eyes, a hint of his

displeasure, whether for the event he’d escaped or for my unexpected visit, I wasn’t sure. It faded

before I could study it, making me wonder whether I’d imagined it.

“I’m here because—” My words faltered when I noticed the prince’s gaze flicker over my

appearance with an appreciation that made me want to find an even more drastic curse than the one

I’d planned. My jaw tightened. He noticed my scowl and hastily looked away with a blush.

“Forgive me, you’re…rather beautiful, even when soaked.”

It took every ounce of discipline to resist rolling my eyes. “Even magic can’t stop a storm. I know

this is an inconvenient time to call upon you, but my business with you is too urgent to be delayed. My

apologies for forcing you to meet with me in the rain."

"No apology is necessary." His grin returned as he leaned against the pillar framing the door,

arms folded. "I'm admittedly rather curious. I often receive guests in the reception room or even the

throne room, so this is quite different. I'm sure such a setting would make even meetings with the most

stuffy of dignitaries somewhat bearable. I must keep this in mind for the future. Thank you for the

ingenious idea."

He winked and I merely stared, watching as he tipped his head back with a chuckle to stare up at

the dark sky. Rain soaked his hair, causing it to drip down his cheeks and plaster against his brow in a

rather appealing way. But while the effect would cause many girls to swoon, it only escalated my

resentment towards him.

As did his smile when he next met my gaze. It was less arrogant than it'd been before, almost…

sweet. "Your silence as to your purpose for this unexpected pleasure causes me to question the

supposed urgency of your visit, but I don't mind. Perhaps I can even request you take longer than you

initially planned; I’m in no hurry to return to the feast.”

I forced a tight smile. “I won’t take any more of your time than necessary. Surely you’re not the

type of man who’d purposely keep his intended waiting?”

His expression faltered. “I—” He sighed. “There’s no need to worry; she likely welcomes my

absence as much as I do hers.”

I frowned at the unexpected admission. He seemed to realize moments after he’d spoken what

he’d unintentionally revealed.

His eyes widened. “Forgive me, that was uncalled for.”

He smiled again, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. Instead he seemed almost…weary, as if the

events of the day had taken their toll on him. Unsurprising that a pampered, lazy prince would find his

duties tedious.

“And your admonition is sound,” he continued. “I must do my duty and return to her as soon as

possible.” He tilted his head, an effect that only made him *more* handsome, the scoundrel. “Now

won’t you tell me what you need me for? Whatever it is, I trust you’ll make it worth my while?”

My poise faltered and I found I couldn’t speak. This exchange wasn’t going at all like I’d planned.

I hadn’t expected Prince Gladen to be so… *charming*, and I was frustrated that whatever spell *he* was

working on *me* was causing me to falter in my previous resolve.

But I could not, *would not*. His unexpected behavior was undoubtedly done solely in duty, a

deference to one with magical powers and our upcoming positions when I became Royal Enchantress

serving under his kingship. But admittedly, whatever game he was playing was rather effective, which

meant I needed to act before his charm could dissuade me further.

“I brought you a gift.” I reached into my cloak to withdraw the rose, warm to the touch, a sign of

the magic it harbored, just waiting to be unleashed.

Prince Gladen’s eyebrows lifted. “A rose?” His tone was surprisingly reverent, as was his gaze

as he examined it more closely. “A *rosa westerland*, by the looks of it. Such a lovely species. I read

about them in—” He cut off his own words with an awkward cough. “I mean…I’ve seen them…in the

gardens…” He shifted as if nervous and fell silent.

For a moment I stared. Was His Highness a connoisseur of roses? How… unexpected. But my

surprise was short-lived when he straightened with a rather pompous air I’d come to expect from him,

as if trying to wrap his dignity back around himself.

“It’s a lovely gift, but I have to wonder why a prince is in need of a flower, especially one from

his own garden, no matter how lovely.”

His tone had become so unenthusiastic that whatever softening I might have *thought* I was

experiencing towards him vanished in an instant, causing my resentment to return in a rush.

“His Highness doesn’t want an enchanted rose?” It was an effort to keep my tone controlled.

His eyebrows lifted again, this time with greater interest. “An *enchanted* rose? I suppose that

does change things.”

He reached for it and I handed it to him, but even though I no longer held it, its dark, unsettling

aura lingered on my skin. Nothing happened when he took it, for the flower was merely a base for the

incantation I still needed to perform in order to unleash the curse.

Prince Gladen twirled the rose by its stem as he admired it. “What is the purpose of an enchanted

rose? I’m admittedly rather curious.”

“It contains a spell, one I created especially for you in celebration of your marriage.” He’d soon

see just what sort of spell I had in mind.

His expression faltered and his hand froze mid-twirl. “As thoughtful as that is, such a gesture is

unnecessary."

"Please, Your Highness," I said with another smile. "I insist." I hoped my false sweetness would

serve as a disguise for my rising annoyance.

He sighed. "Forgive me for my ingratitude. I do appreciate your thoughtfulness and will accept

your gift gratefully. After all, who am I to reject an enchantress?"

His look became expectant, my cue to perform the magic I'd come here for…but I hesitated.

Despite weeks of anticipation and my long nights of study in preparation, now that I stood at the

threshold of this path, I found I couldn't move. A sliver of doubt had finally pierced my previous

determination for revenge, allowing my conscience to return to whisper its oft-repeated question: was

I doing the right thing?

It was quite an effort to push away my lingering doubts. The concentration needed to perform such

advanced magic as the curse required left no room for distraction. I had to do this. For Rosemarie and

the kingdom.

I gathered all the resentment and anger I felt towards the prince, fuel for my spell, and closed my

eyes to allow the darkness of the night and the wind and rain from the storm to seep over me, lending

its power to my own. At first my magic seemed to recoil, for all the spells I'd performed up until this

point had relied solely on light. But like being suddenly submerged in a frigid lake, after a while it

adjusted to the discomfort, and soon even embraced the power.

I allowed the magic to envelop me before I murmured the words of the curse in a language still

foreign to me, the magic they unlocked still unrehearsed. But despite my rudimentary skills, the rose

in the prince's hand began to glow with scarlet light, causing his eyes to widen. At first the glow only

surrounded the flower before it slowly began to seep over him. By his sudden sharp gasp, I knew the

curse was already taking effect.

I increased my focus, pushing my magic further. But the spell was complicated, far beyond my

abilities. For magic was like a symphony, and though my powers were adequate enough to perform

the magical notes without mistakes, the magic's music lacked artistry; any that filled the spell was

provided by the elements around me, not by my own powers. Would it be enough?

The complications involving such an advanced spell soon made it difficult for me to maintain my

fragile hold on it. My control slipped, and for a faltering moment I felt the curse briefly recoil away

from the prince and touch my skin, bringing with it not only hot, burning pain, but a dark, sinister

feeling, as if I were trapped in an endless night. The unsettling feeling nearly caused me to release my

shaky grasp on my powers; only with great effort did I manage to keep hold of them and complete the

spell.

The curse finished and the magic surrounding the rose faded away, leaving it looking entirely

ordinary. The moment my magic slipped away I frantically looked at my hand where the curse had

touched it. I released a shaky breath of relief: the skin was smooth, unmarred. The curse hadn't

touched me after all. But had it reached its intended target?

I lifted my gaze to the prince. At first I didn't recognize him. His handsome features had altered—

his golden hair had lost its sheen, his bright blue eyes had dimmed, his boyish features had become

distorted, and he was covered in warts. He stood frozen before gingerly feeling his face and taking in

his disfigured hands.

The rose slipped from his hold to fall to the ground as his sharp gaze snapped to mine. "What did

you do?"

I stooped down to pick up the discarded rose, a memento of the occasion, and met his gaze with a

lifted chin. “Exactly what you deserve. No one displeases an enchantress and gets away with it.”

Without another word of explanation, I turned and descended the steps deeper into the storm, leaving

behind the now scarred prince.

I’d imagined I’d feel triumph, but with every step, a different feeling settled over me, not the

victory I’d anticipated after finally enacting my revenge but something else, an emotion that almost

felt like…guilt, for I knew this wasn’t the person I’d set out to be when I’d taken my magic vows.

Just what sort of path had this curse inadvertently put me on?

C H A P T E R 4

I awoke the following morning to a prickling sensation spreading across my palms and up

my arm. I groggily opened my eyes to stare at the hand curled near my face. I bolted

upright with a sharp gasp and lifted my hands to examine them in the bright morning

sunshine tumbling through my window, light far too cheerful for the condition afflicting me.

Warts covered my skin, distorting it in ugly patterns, just like those that marred the prince.

Horror stole my breath as I gaped at the blemishes before my hands went to my face. Still smooth,

but my frantic mind didn't believe what my fingers felt. I scrambled as quietly as I could from my bed

to avoid waking up my still-sleeping sister and hurried to the mirror hanging on the opposite wall. I

tentatively peered into the glass, fully expecting to find my features as distorted as the prince's had

become last night, only to see my usual flawless complexion.

I sank against the wall, but my relief was short-lived as worries crowded my mind. I scrambled to

push through the panic in order to sort out the puzzle. Where had these warts come from? They were

obviously the result of the curse I'd cast, but why was *I* suffering from its effects in addition to the

prince? Had something gone wrong?

Even midst my paralyzing anxiety, it didn't take long for me to remember when my control over

my magic had faltered, just for a moment, evidence my powers had not been up to the task for the

spell I'd chosen. That one lapse in concentration had allowed the spell to touch my skin. Dread

pooled my stomach. Had the curse…backfired?

Over the course of my studies I'd read about such occurrences, but considering last night was the

first instance I’d lost control of my magic, I’d allowed the neglected facts about curses,

countercurses, and backfired spells to gather cobwebs in the recesses of my mind, leaving me entirely

without guidance now. Did curses wear off on their own? Or would I need to create another spell to

counter it? So many questions without any answers.

Desperate to discover a solution, I sought guidance from my faithful spellbook…only to find it

moodily sulking in the corner, where it’d been determinedly giving me the silent treatment ever since

last night. I walked over and grazed its spine with my fingertips, only for it to dart away, stubbornly

keeping itself closed to prevent me from accessing its spells.

I sighed. Apparently it was still upset with me concerning my choice to curse the prince…and thus

myself. I crossed the room and made another attempt to cajole it into my hand, only for it to float up

towards the ceiling with a disgruntled ruffle.

I had no time for this. Since my temperamental spellbook refused to offer its assistance, that left

me only one other way. I quickly dressed in a long-sleeved dress to better disguise the warts marring

my skin before hurrying from my bedroom down the narrow stairwell to the library.

The room was thankfully abandoned, allowing me to explore the magical tomes undisturbed. It

took several combings of the vast collection to find what I was looking for: a book of magical theory,

where I was certain I'd discover information about curses and backfired spells.

I frantically turned the pages, searching through the mass of text for what I needed. I paused to

read the section on curses, but in my urgency and anxiety the words blurred together, taking me

several attempts to read the paragraphs…only for them to tell me nothing. I stared at the words, as if

doing so would compel them to change into something useful, but instead they only taunted me with

their lack of information, leaving me no way out of my current predicament.

Annoyed, I slammed the book shut and shoved it back onto the shelf before glaring at my wart-

covered hands, so scarred, so ugly. However would I get rid of this? Surely Enchantress Ivy would

have a solution, but I feared asking her, for then she'd know what I'd done. The last thing I wanted

was her disapproval.

But I feared it was something I couldn't escape. There was little time to uncover a solution before

Enchantress Ivy returned from her usual morning rounds in the village, and then her acute observation

would see the blemishes tainting my skin and she'd realize what I'd done.

My panic rose. That couldn't happen. Desperate, I strode to another section of shelves and tugged

out the well-worn, familiar *Concealment Charms*.

My rising panic made using the book necessary even though I was an expert in these types of

spells, for they were ones I'd learned at an early age and used frequently in order to cover the

mishaps I'd often found myself in. I reexamined my hand. Though their presence was jarring, luckily

the magical blemishes only covered a small area of skin, nothing a simple charm couldn't mask.

I carefully read over the familiar spell before summoning my powers… only to find myself unable

to access them, as if an invisible barrier stood between us; no matter how much I searched, I couldn't

find a way around it.

I pulled my powers back with a worried frown. Had the curse addled my magic? *Don't be*

ridiculous, curses can't do that…can *they*? I rigidly shook my head. No, of course they couldn't. My

magic was such an intricate part of me I couldn't imagine anything being strong enough to make it

disappear permanently.

But despite my reassurances, there was no doubt I was having difficulty accessing my powers.

Desperate, I tried again. This time when I searched I found a crack in the impenetrable obstacle

before me, allowing me a thin passage to my magic. But even after I managed to seize hold of it, it

was difficult to control, as if something had shifted inside me. My powers felt…different, almost

tainted, as if a shadow had now entered a previously illuminated room.

I fought to ignore this pinprick of darkness tainting my magic so I could perform the spell. Despite

my practice with this very enchantment, the spell was a struggle, much like it'd been years ago when I

was first learning how to use my magic, as if my powers had dimmed between now and last night.

The panic I'd been fighting to quell rose again. What was happening?

I struggled, fighting through the difficulty, until the charm seeped over my hand and fully covered

my warts. The spell completed, I slumped against the desk before shakily putting the books away and

making my way up the stairs.

At the top of the steps I found a much-needed distraction from my worries. In the time I'd been

perusing the library, Rosemarie had risen and was now enjoying a breakfast of porridge and toast in

the sun-filled kitchen.

She looked up with a smile. “Good morning, Astrid.” Her cheerful expression faltered upon

seeing mine. “You’re rather pale. Are you alright?”

Her inquiry was lost on me, my attention riveted to the light in her countenance. Ever since Prince

Gladen’s rejection she’d been languishing more every day, wilting like a flower away from the sun,

but now…it was as if she was beginning to bloom once more.

I slowly bridged the distance between us to settle in the seat beside her in order to better examine

her; she looked even brighter up close. “Rosemarie?” I asked in a stunned, disbelieving whisper.

“Are *you* alright?”

Confusion puckered her brow before her smile returned. “I am. I did give you cause to worry,

didn’t I? For that I must apologize. I do tend to allow my emotions to get the best of me.”

“So…you’re doing better?” I was almost afraid to ask. Though I wanted nothing more than her

well-being, I couldn’t understand how she could have improved so suddenly.

Her smile only brightened, finally reaching her eyes after all these weeks. “I’m doing much better.

Thank you for being so concerned for me.” Her quiet contentment quickly became shadowed by her

own worry as she surveyed me with ever-widening eyes. “And what of you? You don’t look well.

Are you ill?”

I waved away her inquiries; my state of being was of little importance compared to the riddle

before me. “But… *how* is it you’re doing so well?” I scrambled for an explanation. Had whispers

about the prince’s curse already spread from the palace? Had seeking justice for his slight against her

been what finally healed her?

She shrugged as she returned to her porridge. “Perhaps simply…time.”

Time? My brow furrowed. How could something so simple heal such a broken heart?

But I couldn’t deny that there’d been a change in her. I ignored the plate of toast she pushed

towards me and continued studying her. She *did* look much better. Though I could see that some of her

wound lingered, for the first time in weeks I felt as if my sister had returned, a thought which caused

my heavy heart to lift.

“Please stop staring, Astrid, I’m fine. But you’re clearly not. Do eat something.” Rosemarie gave

the plate another nudge, and though my swirling stomach made eating the last thing I wanted to do, I’d

do it to appease her.

I nibbled at some toast. “Any word from the palace?”

I frowned as she shook her head. So she hadn’t heard about the prince’s curse, which meant her

improvement had nothing to do with my taking revenge on her behalf but was simply her…getting

better.

I tried to ignore the unease nudging my conscience at that thought, but it was impossible to escape

the doubt it’d brought. Perhaps I’d acted impulsively and the curse had been unnecessary…but I

hastily pushed those thoughts away. Though it’d been my prime justification, Rosemarie’s healing

hadn’t been my sole motivation behind the curse; unless Prince Gladen was taught a lesson, he’d only

continue to break other girls’ hearts.

Rosemarie stood to take her dishes to the wash basin. “I just remembered: a messenger arrived

from the palace early this morning for Enchantress Ivy concerning an urgent matter.”

My bite of toast lodged in my suddenly dry throat. *An urgent matter*… could it possibly be

concerning Prince Gladen's curse?

Foreboding prickled my skin, and for the first time since coming up with my scheme, I fully

realized its implications. Had I truly expected the secrecy I'd maintained while preparing the curse to

linger after it'd been cast? Of course one look at Prince Gladen would reveal what had happened, and

with only two magical beings residing in Rosileya's capital, the potential caster was limited to me…

and Enchantress Ivy.

Horror clenched my heart at the thought that my impulsive actions would cause problems for the

woman who'd become more than a mentor, but also my adopted mother. Because I was under her

guardianship, she'd be forced to take responsibility for my actions. Would her royal position suffer?

And what of my own future position? Would I lose my apprenticeship? My mind whirled with each

horrifying possibility, ones I hadn't considered when I'd first begun this journey, so blinded by

revenge I'd lost all sense.

"Astrid? *Astrid*?" Only my sister's worried voice could tug me from my frantic thoughts, where I

found her hovering over me, eyes swirling with concern. “You truly don’t look well. Are you sure

you’re alright?”

I was many things, but *alright* was definitely not one of them. But how could I explain to my sister

what ailed me?

Luckily I was spared answering by Enchantress Ivy’s return from the castle. I stiffened at her

entrance and my gaze snapped up to meet hers. She stood in the doorway, watching me, her

expression graver than I’d ever seen it since she’d informed me and Rosemarie of our mother’s

passing. She undeniably knew of my guilt; I’d been a fool to think I could hide what I’d done.

I shifted beneath her disapproving perusal, waiting for her to speak…only for her to remain silent

except for her nonverbal invitation for me to join her in the magic prep room. I shakily stood and

followed her, my heart beating erratically with every step.

“Today we’ll be working on some healing tonics.” Her tone was calm, controlled, with no hint of

the impending interrogation I was certain would shortly come.

It took my anxious mind a moment to register today’s task was different from the spells we’d spent

weeks preparing. “What of the enchantments for His Highness’s engagement ball?”

She didn’t answer for a moment as she arranged the ingredients and vials on our work station, a

task that normally fell to me. “It’s the strangest thing…his engagement has been canceled.”

I gaped at her. “*Canceled*?”

Apparently a broken engagement was one of many consequences rendered on the curses’s behalf.

While I cared little for the prince’s relationships, I knew enough about this alliance to know it’d been

important for the kingdom.

This wasn’t an outcome I’d foreseen, and while I was secretly pleased the prince would now feel

the sting of rejection and perhaps gain some much-needed humility, my mind whirled with the

consequences to the kingdom that would come from this.

With a swirl of glistening magic, Ivy began chopping up ingredients and stirring them into the

simmering cauldron. “Apparently the prince finds himself in quite the predicament: he’s become

disfigured, a condition my analysis concludes is a result of magic. You wouldn’t happen to know

anything about that, would you?” Her look became piercing.

“Of course not,“ I shakily managed when I finally found my voice.

She pursed her lips. “Indeed.” She continued watching me, her gaze penetrating. “I recognize a

curse when I see one, and considering there are no other known enchantresses in the area, that leaves

a very small pool of suspects.”

My heart pounded painfully in my chest. I ached to lie, to deny any involvement in the prince’s

curse, but I knew doing so would be utterly pointless. My shoulders slumped, my silent admission.

Ivy released a long, weary breath. “Curses are not condoned, Astrid. And to curse a prince! What

were you thinking?”

I flinched at the scolding, one deep down I knew I deserved, before my pride flared, pushing any

hint of remorse away. “I—he deserved it.”

“No one deserves to be cursed,” she said. “I warned you against this path when I caught you

poking around my forbidden books, yet you ignored me. Now we must deal with the consequences,

ones I suspect extend beyond Prince Gladen.”

Her gaze flickered down to my shaking hands. She seized my right one and lifted it eye level, her

trained observation no match for my rough concealment charm. With a wave of her own powers the

magic faded, revealing the warts scarring my skin; more had appeared between when I'd cast my

cover-up charm and now, so that the cursed affliction now covered nearly my entire arm.

She didn't speak for another long moment, causing the tension filling the silence to tauten. "Hmm."

Without another word she released me and resumed her work.

That single sound was almost more painful than if she'd given me a long scolding. I stared at her

back facing me like an impenetrable wall. "Ivy?" I asked tentatively.

She didn't speak for another agonizing moment. "Magic can do many things, but even the most

powerful of spells cannot hide a guilty conscience…nor can it soften a hardened heart, as I'm sure

you now well know." She gave me another piercing look that somehow still managed to be loving

despite her clear disappointment. "You don't feel any better than before you cursed Prince Gladen, do

you?"

I ached to deny her assessment, for she was right: I didn't feel better, I felt *worse*. For now my

anger was warring with a multitude of other emotions that hadn't been there before: guilt, remorse,

helplessness, and fear. But I didn't want to admit this, because then I'd be forced to face the truth that

my venture into the darkness for a cause I'd believed to be noble had instead all been a huge mistake.

"But—he deserved it," I stuttered, my last futile attempt to justify my foolish choices, one that

sounded weak, even to me.

"He deserved nothing," Ivy said firmly. "But you couldn't see that, so blinded by your anger you

used your powers irresponsibly, despite your vows to the contrary. Now we must deal with the

consequences." She sighed wearily. "I've already handled the first matter. Your actions could bring

great harm to our working relationship with the royal family, so I performed a spell on the king and

queen, one that persuaded them to believe their son's condition came from a source other than magic.

But that is all I can do. The rest is up to you as you walk a new path alone: one of atonement."

What did such a path entail? Did she really expect me to undo the curse I'd worked so hard to

create? And would doing so even be possible with the strange way my magic was now behaving?

I sighed, already daunted by the task that lay before me. "How do I break it?"

The corner of Ivy's mouth lifted. "Some lessons are best learned when one discovers the solution

for themselves.” She rested a gentle hand on my shoulder, her touch still loving despite my mistakes,

before she returned to the healing tonic bubbling over the hearth.

But I still had one more burning question. “If I break the curse on the prince, will it also break the

one on me?”

“Perhaps.” She gave the cauldron a few stirs before sprinkling some clover leaves and goose

feathers into the fern-green brew. “I’m not surprised the curse backfired—you tried to cast a spell far

beyond your abilities and contrary to what your magic is used for… resulting in you getting a taste of

your own medicine. I warned you anger and revenge were nothing but poison for the one who

experiences it.”

“What do you mean?” I shakily asked.

She glanced at me with raised eyebrows. “You performed a curse for one’s appearance to reflect

the state of one’s own heart, correct?”

I should have known her vast array of magical knowledge would make it impossible for me to

hide the actual curse I’d performed. I lowered my eyes and nodded.

“I thought so. I’m not surprised such a spell touched you. We can never fully separate ourselves

from our powers when we use our magic. As such, casting that curse inevitably left its mark upon

you."

My desperation caused my voice to rise. "But the curse was to serve as a reflection for one's

heart. How could it result in this?" I lifted my hand.

She glanced at me with a wry smile. "Perhaps the prince's heart is not the only one that needs to

change."

I frantically tried to make sense of her words before the reality of her message hit me full force.

"You're saying *my* heart caused the same reaction as the prince's? But how? I'm nothing like *he* is.

He's conceited and horrible, and I'm—"

But the remainder of my protest was swallowed up as my chest tightened at the realization now

pressing against me, heavy and unbearable: anger and revenge had hardened my heart, causing me to

turn to dark magic in order to enact my own form of *justice*, and now the curse was revealing the state

of my own heart for all to see.

I undoubtedly deserved such a punishment. After all, I'd broken my vows by allowing myself to

go down a path of darkness. And while I'd only taken a few steps, they'd been enough to grant the

backfired enchantment its power. Treading this path any further would soon cause the curse to alter

my appearance as completely as it'd done for Prince Gladen.

I didn't deserve my magic.

My shoulders slumped. "Will I lose my position?" I hated how small and frightened I sounded.

Ivy's expression softened. "Not if you atone for your misuse of magic and rid yourself of the

vengeance filling your heart. But if you don't extract it, it'll become permanent."

My desperation rose. No, that couldn't happen. I simply couldn't lose my magic. Outside of my

sister, it brought me the greatest joy.

Yet the task that would allow me to keep it felt utterly impossible. "But how do I reverse it?

There must be a countercurse."

She carefully removed the cauldron from the hearth. "Seldom are things as easy to undo as they

are to do, which is why you must learn to think before you act, especially considering the great power

you possess. You must understand that curses are choices of darkness and hatred, none of which have

any place in our magic. The only way to dispel it is through light."

Light? What did she mean? But before I had a chance to ask, she gave my shoulder a reassuring

squeeze before departing from the room, leaving me alone to unscramble the riddle on how to atone

for what I'd done.

And although I knew doing so was the right path, it still filled me with dread and uncertainty.

C H A P T E R 5

M y wart-covered hand shook as I struggled to spread the concealing charm across my

skin to disguise the disfigurement hidden beneath. After several failed attempts, I

realized my powers alone were currently too weak, even for a spell I was so familiar

with, so I'd settled on using a base. The potent, herbal remedy stung as it touched my skin.

With each layer I spread, the deeper my resentment towards the prince grew. I still wasn't entirely

sure what had gone wrong with my curse, but the more I thought about it, the more convinced I was

that it couldn't be completely my fault; the prince's behavior had forced my hand, and it was his fault

that I was now tasked with finding a way to reverse the spell, one that would force me to interact with

him far more than I wanted to.

My anger over that fact simmered within me like a spell bubbling in a cauldron, making it difficult

to concentrate on either my magic or the riddle on how to escape my current predicament. How did I

reverse a curse that had already been beyond my abilities when my current powers were so

weakened?

It didn't help that I was entirely unfamiliar with curses, and while the rules of magic dictated that

to ensure balance every spell possessed a countercurse, I was at a loss as to what it could possibly

be. Whenever I sought Enchantress Ivy's advice, she only reminded me of what she'd told me before:

curses stemmed from darkness and thus could only be broken by light. Yet how could I create light in

a heart ugly enough to have disfigured the prince so drastically?

After much pondering, I decided the best approach would be to try to root out the prince's

darkness. Considering the curse was based on his heart, if I could get him to see his own flaws,

perhaps it would lead him to change them…and thus break the spell over him. If in doing so I proved

he was a bad person who had every right to be taught a lesson, then that would be an added bonus.

But though I didn't doubt he'd deserved to be cursed, deep down I reluctantly admitted I likely

shouldn't have broken my vows to do it.

Unfortunately, my chosen course would take me to the castle—the very last place I wanted to be

—and more specifically to the prince who resided there, the very last person I wanted to see. But go

there I must if I had any hope of breaking the curse on myself and reinstating my place as Ivy's

apprentice.

I finished my treatment and corked the vial of remedy before examining my reflection in the

mirror. Even with my weakened magic I could faintly see through the spell to the line of warts that

had appeared across my right cheek only this morning, a sign that the curse was spreading, which only

increased my desperation to break it, no matter the cost.

I sighed and turned away from the looking glass, only to find my gaze drawn to the window,

where the castle loomed in the distance. Dread pooled in my stomach at the thought of entering it and

meeting with the prince. While my position as the apprentice enchantress granted me easy access to

the palace, the last thing I wanted was for Prince Gladen to recognize me. A spell of disguise would

have to do.

I retrieved my spellbook, which after a bit of cajoling and some palliative strokes allowed me

access to its pages. It only took a few minutes searching through them to find a disguise spell, a

simpler one than I was used to considering my powers were still rather shaky. Rather than choosing a

spell that would transform my appearance, I selected an enchantment that would merely trick the

prince’s eyes into not recognizing me.

I read over the instructions several times before taking a wavering breath and summoning my

powers. I searched for its familiar warm spark of light hidden beneath layers of obstacles blocking

my powers’ usual route. It took a while to poke and prod through the shadows masking my powers,

but I finally found their familiar glimmer. I seized it and clung to it tightly, and although my magic was

weak, there was just enough to perform the spell.

I felt it seep over me, a cooling sensation that began from my head and trickled down to my toes.

When the spell was complete, I took a moment to catch my breath before making my way to the

palace. Once inside, I explored the corridors, searching for the prince, all while listening to the

whispers of the passing servants and members of the court, many of whom gossiped of their

disfigured prince and his broken engagement in hushed tones.

My lips twitched into a smile, but it quickly faltered at the thought of the looming task before me. I

made my way through the lavishly decorated corridors, the ornate state rooms, and the gardens,

searching for the prince, but I didn't find His Highness anywhere. I longed to ask a passing servant

where I might find him, but my disguise spell was only strong enough to work on the prince himself,

and I wanted no one to know that the apprentice enchantress was seeking him out, lest they make the

connection between me and the curse the prince suffered from.

After nearly an hour, I finally resorted to using some of my precious magic for a tracking spell. I

created a golden bulb of light, which floated on ahead, guiding me through the castle labyrinth,

occasionally pausing to flicker like a flame on the brink of blowing out, a further sign of my

weakened magic. I prayed it'd last long enough for me to find His Highness.

At the end of a narrow hallway the tracking spell gave a final flicker before fading completely. I

tried to summon another one, but the tracking spell had used up the remaining magic currently at my

disposal. I heaved a frustrated sigh, even as I couldn't help feeling fierce relief for an excuse to avoid

interacting with the prince…at least for today.

I turned to walk back up the corridor but paused at the sight of a set of double doors not far from

where my tracking spell had stopped. Curious, I opened them, and my breath immediately caught at

the vision before me.

A library.

My eyes widened in wonder as I stepped into the vast room, aglow with sunlight tumbling in

through towering two-story windows, which cast a sheen of golden light across the array of shelves

filling the grand floor and lining the balcony.

I tipped my head back to take in all the books, so awed that for a moment I forgot my purpose in

coming to the castle. I itched to explore this grand collection, certain that amongst the volumes would

be rare books on magic or storybooks much like those I used to spend hours reading first with Mother,

then Rosemarie. I began exploring the shelves in earnest.

“Our library never fails to impress,” a deep, familiar voice said behind me. “But you seem more

awed than most.”

I startled and spun around to find the prince himself perched in a window seat, sitting in a manner

far too casual for a royal. I bit my lip to suppress a sigh. It appeared I wouldn’t be wriggling out of

my obligatory duty to fraternize with the prince after all.

For a moment I simply stared, taking in his appearance with a critical eye. His previously

handsome features remained as twisted as the night the curse had been cast the week before, making

him rather unattractive, and that didn't even take into account the warts, festering blisters, and red

blotchy discoloration now marring almost every inch of his skin. Such a contrast to how he used to

look.

While before his altered appearance would have pleased me, now I only felt overwhelmed at the

task before me. My earlier plan of trying to break it by pointing out the prince's faults in hopes of

encouraging him to become a better person seemed utterly impossible when faced with him now; only

a very ugly heart could have resulted in such disfigurement.

Prince Gladen watched me eying him with a resigned expression, as if in the days following his

curse he'd received such a perusal many times and was already tired of it. For a brief moment I

almost felt sorry for him before I reminded myself that he didn't deserve my sympathy; anything that

caused the arrogant man to humble himself was exactly what I'd wanted when I'd set out that dark and

stormy night with revenge guiding my course.

Too late I remembered the proper decorum befitting royalty, nevermind I didn't like this particular

one. "Your Highness." I offered a reluctant curtsy.

His eyebrows lifted. "Ah, so you *did* recognize me. I wasn't sure you would considering the

recent events that have altered me in such a way."

He gave me a look that almost dared me to ask what had happened to him, but the last thing I

wanted to do was humor him. After a moment he shrugged, not seeming bothered by my silence.

"It appears you're not here to see for yourself the latest rumors. I thank you for granting me a

welcome reprieve from sharing my story; I've already told it far too many times."

I stiffened; such an account would undoubtedly include the *means* by which he'd been cursed.

Enchantress Ivy's protective spell had only been cast on the king and queen, leaving nothing to stop

Prince Gladen should he wish to take the opportunity to soil my name, which he'd likely wasted no

time in doing. Did the entire kingdom already know that I was to blame for his condition?

I sighed. Why had I ever thought that the curse was a good idea?

The prince was still eying me, as if waiting for my curiosity to get the better of me, forcing me to

inquire after him. I rolled my eyes at his arrogance. Did he think everyone's actions revolved around

him? "Luckily for you, I came to the library not for gossip, but in search of a story far more interesting

than your own." I normally wouldn't have dared speak to His Highness in such a way, but my disguise

and my lingering anger towards him made me feel bold.

He tilted his head, seeming surprised, almost…intrigued. My heart pounded the longer he stared

at me, as if he were trying to see through my disguise to the enchantress who had cursed him. But by

the slow way he smiled, I knew that for the moment my unreliable magic held.

"It would be quite the challenge to find a story more fantastic than my own, even midst such an

impressive collection as this."

Of course he'd think that. I nearly snorted at his usual conceit…but paused at the teasing glint in

his eyes, as if he himself didn't take such a comment seriously. Puzzlement furrowed my brow.

"I'm not so certain about that," I said. "Many stories contain human transformations; your situation

isn't unique to you, but can be found in a wide array of books."

“True, and *I’ve* read enough of such stories to appreciate the fact that my situation could be much

worse: I’m grateful not to have been turned into an amphibian, a transformation which would make it

rather difficult to read.” He spoke so casually of his predicament, as if truly unbothered by it, which

only deepened my confusion.

“Do you read often, Your Highness?” I asked.

“As often as I can, though obligations of the court often got in the way. But due to recent events

I’ve thankfully been temporarily freed from that tedium.” He tilted his head, a twinkle in his eyes.

“Forgive me for speaking so ill of the court; by your manner of dress I know you’re a member of it

yourself, though I’d wager you might share my aversion to it considering you now find yourself in the

library. It’s not often others enter my world of books and reading. I believe an introduction is in

order.”

I didn’t immediately speak, too startled to have been mistaken for nobility to find my voice, but

perhaps it wasn’t too surprising; my apprenticeship to the Royal Enchantress had risen my status and

allowed me to dress in a manner far above the station of my birth, a manner of dress that would

become even more appropriate once I rose to my new royal position…if I didn't lose the opportunity

by failing to find a way to break the prince's curse.

Prince Gladen was still waiting, rather patiently, for an introduction, but I continued to hesitate. I

couldn't very well give him *my* name. So I spoke the first one that came to mind: Mother's.

"I'm Lady Dahlia."

He rose to offer me the proper bow in greeting before he smiled, rather sweetly. "Dahlia…that

was the name of our previous Royal Enchantress."

I blinked. Why had I chosen that name? Of course he would recognize it. "Oh?" was all I could

manage.

But he didn't seem skeptical or suspicious in the least. "Dahlia, named after the flower, I

presume? A lovely species."

I raised a skeptical brow at this second show of interest in flowers. "His Highness appreciates

flowers?" I didn't bother to mask my surprise.

"I appreciate a vast number of subjects, something I've admittedly strived to keep a secret…at my

parents' insistence. There seems little point now."

It was yet another strange piece to the puzzle that was the prince, making there too many for me to

even attempt to make sense of them. “Why would Their Majesties insist on such a thing?”

“They’re all about appearances,” he explained. “And thus they find the idea of a bookish prince

rather…embarrassing. It’s not princely, you see. Princes are to enjoy court and a good hunt, not

books.” His expression remained casual, but his tone had changed, hardened, while his eyes had lost

their twinkle. As startling as its initial presence had been, I found I missed it.

“And you find it unnecessary to go along with their charade?” I asked.

“Due to my present circumstances, there’s truly no reason to continue, now that I’ve already

disappointed them by losing my greatest asset, as you can see.” Bitterness laced his tone as he

gestured towards his face.

I pursed my lips to keep back my smirk, pleased the curse was already doing its job. But before I

could find the well-chosen words to help him see his conceit, he returned to his book.

Flustered, I turned away and tried to occupy myself with the surrounding shelves, anything to

distract me from the prince who was turning out to be far more confusing than I could have ever

imagined. But his nearby presence made it impossible to focus, causing the titles to blur together.

I wasn’t sure why I was so aware of him, or why I was finding it difficult to refocus myself on my

actual purpose for coming to the library. Yet the discrepancy between the prince I’d thought he was

and the one I was discovering was now far too intriguing to ignore.

I risked a glance over my shoulder to find him with the same contentment he’d had throughout our

interaction. Where was his anger, his resentment? Shouldn’t he be feeling both after having been

cursed? I’d gone to great lengths to exact my revenge; the least he could do would be to have the

decency to suffer for it before I broke the curse. But I’d no sooner thought this than I felt a few more

warts prickle against my skin, a manifestation of the darkness filling my own.

Blast.

I sensed the prince’s gaze on me and stole another glance over my shoulder to find him watching

me with intense interest as I perused the shelves. I shifted nervously at the attention. “What is it?”

Crimson caressed his cheeks. “Forgive me, I’m simply curious. Ladies of the court are rarely seen

within these walls, and I want to know which book is powerful enough to draw you here.”

I reluctantly turned my back on the section of magic I itched to investigate. “Perhaps it’s not a

specific book in particular; the thought of exploring a library as wondrous as this is in itself its own

allure.”

“It must be quite strong if it’s allowed you to brave the library containing a beast. I’m admittedly

surprised I haven’t frightened you away yet.”

“Are you suggesting I have reason to be frightened?” Perhaps focusing on that possibility could

nudge him into seeing some of the flaws that had given his curse its power.

The corner of his mouth lifted into a humorless smile. “I didn’t initially think so, but with the stir

it’s caused amongst the court…apparently a prince who’s no longer handsome is something to be

feared.”

“On the contrary, I find handsome princes are far more dangerous.”

His eyes widened, and for a moment he was silent. “I believe there’s some truth to that.”

I’d resumed my browsing and my fingers had just grazed a rather thick volume of fairytales I

thought Rosemarie would enjoy when his words caused me to whirl around. “*What*?” Was he actually

agreeing with my sarcastic quip?

“Ah, *now* you’re intrigued.” He grinned again. Despite his disfigurement, his smile was still

somehow charming, containing a hidden warmth I hadn’t expected. “I must confess that being

handsome brings with it its own set of trials. Are you certain you don’t want to hear my story? I

assure you it’s as interesting and dramatic as any fairytale contained in that volume that’s captured

your interest.”

He patted the spot near him, an invitation to join him, which was the last thing I wanted. I warily

eyed first the spot, then the book resting on his lap, seeking an excuse to decline the prince. “I’d hate

to disturb you from your own reading.” Though I did need to somehow gain his confidence if I wanted

him to open up to me.

“Even if I welcome the disturbance?” His look was almost flirtatious as he patted the spot beside

him again. My cheeks warmed, a reaction I silently cursed.

But there was something more in the prince’s expression. It took me a moment to decipher the

emotion: almost a desperation for me to accept his invitation. I frowned. Was the prince…lonely?

It was an emotion I knew all too well. Shortly after Mother had died, I’d been left alone with my

sister, who'd quickly become withdrawn, leaving me without anyone to sustain me. Even though it'd

been years since that dark time, I could still feel the heaviness of that isolating feeling. But what

reason did the prince, a man constantly surrounded by fawning nobles, have to be lonely?

But I couldn't deny I sensed that emotion, and it caused my heart to soften against my will. I lifted

my chin. "How can I say no to a prince?"

I told myself *that* was the reason I ventured closer to take the offered place near him on the

window seat, rather than his surprisingly sweet smile and friendly manner. I hated myself for noticing

such things, for his unexpected warm gestures had not been what I'd come here to find.

I settled in the seat and turned to him, only to find his charm had been replaced by a frown. "You

can say no if you want to. I hate making people feel obligated to humor me due to my title alone."

Once more his words surprised me, an emotion I was quickly growing to resent. "You give your

title too much credit, for there are things with far greater power."

His eyebrows rose. "Oh? Such as?"

I couldn't help my mischievous grin. "Curiosity."

He stared at me for a moment before he slowly grinned too. “I believe I understand that emotion

all too well. That very emotion is compelling me to extend our conversation; you’re rather

intriguing.”

I felt my cheeks heat again and I hastily looked away from his easygoing manner, one that almost

disguised his disfigurement and made me forget how it’d come upon him.

But I couldn’t forget, not when I could feel the warts that marred my own skin, hidden beneath my

charm. I reminded myself that the only reason I had to interact with the prince was to break the curse

that had backfired on me and to re-secure the position I’d spent my entire life striving for. It had

nothing to do with his unexpected charm and friendliness and how almost everything he spoke went

against the image I’d created of him in my mind.

The prince closed the book in his lap and leaned forward with a lowered voice. “Now to begin

my ghastly tale: I’m sure it hasn’t escaped your notice that my appearance has become…altered.”

I nearly rolled my eyes. “So this isn’t the latest palace trend?” Sarcasm dripped from my tone.

I expected him to be offended, but his lips only twitched. “I’m surprised you’re so far behind in

the world of fashion. Don’t you know that warts are all the rage?”

“I’m afraid I pay little attention to the trends of the court.” I self-consciously rubbed the warts

brandishing my own skin with my thumb, as if I could rid myself of them. I noticed the prince’s gaze

watching me and hastily lowered my hand. “So your warts are not the result of conforming to the

pressures of the court?”

He shook his head and his look darkened, which was almost startling after the unexpected warmth

filling our interaction. “An enchantress cursed me,” he hissed through his teeth. “She came in the dead

of night and…” He clenched his jaw and didn’t finish.

I tried not to smile, pleased to finally see the resentment I’d been waiting for. “An enchantress?”

His eyes immediately widened, and he looked as if he wanted nothing more than to snatch the

admission back. “I shouldn’t have told you…up until now, I’ve been making up all sorts of

explanations for my appearance and haven’t told anyone what really happened; I should have kept it

that way. Please, keep this with the utmost discretion.”

My brow furrowed. “I will keep your confidence, though I’m admittedly surprised you find it

necessary.” I’d expected him to *want* to spread the news, his own revenge for what I’d done to him.

He hesitated. “Spreading such a story would do nothing to aid my predicament…it would only

upset the enchantress further. I wasn’t in jest when I told you I’m grateful not to have been

transformed into something far worse, and I’m still unconvinced she won’t return and finish the job.”

Even if human transformations had been within the realm of my abilities, I wouldn’t have been

foolish or cruel enough to extend the prince’s punishment that far. “The fact an enchantress cursed you

means you’ve already angered her. You must have done something to offend her.”

His eyebrows rose. “You assume I offended her?”

“You *are* covered in warts. Such a condition wouldn’t have been given without cause.”

He heaved a heavy sigh. “You’re likely right, but I haven’t the faintest idea what offense I could

have caused.”

I resisted the impulse to roll my eyes, but he sensed my skepticism all the same.

“You don’t believe me, I presume.”

“No.” My anonymity once again granted me boldness. “Enchantresses are under a vow to only use

their magic for good, so for one to curse you means you must have done something to deserve it.” I

gave him a pointed look, hoping the blatant hint would cause him some much-needed self-reflection.

For a moment he gaped at me before he sighed. “Perhaps I did.”

I stared in surprise that he’d admitted the possibility so easily. Perhaps the curse wouldn’t be as

difficult to break as I’d thought. But my hopes were quickly dashed when he next spoke.

“But I’m still at a loss as to what; I’ve scarcely interacted with that enchantress.”

We’d interacted enough for me to dislike him immensely…but he was admittedly making it rather

difficult to dislike him now, a thought which caused unwanted guilt to prickle my conscience. But I

hastily shoved the unwanted emotion away and instead refocused my efforts on finding a way to cause

Prince Gladen to see his faults.

His heavy sigh soon interrupted. “Regardless of Enchantress Astrid’s reasoning, she’s

undoubtedly taking great satisfaction in her punishment, considering the repercussions of my offense

have extended beyond simply being able to avoid court and have more opportunity to read.”

I recalled the whispered words I’d overheard throughout the palace corridors. “I think I know the

rest of your story well enough. There were far-reaching consequences of offending someone with

great magic. My condolences on your broken engagement."

To my amazement, instead of looking sorrowful, he only grinned. "There's no need for that. I'm

quite relieved to be rid of her, actually."

I frowned. While I'd found little to recommend his intended, I'd assumed she was exactly Prince

Gladen's type. "But…she was so beautiful." Hadn't that been enough to enamor the prince?

He frowned. "Hmm, she *was* beautiful. Quite so. But that was all she had to recommend her."

Prince Gladen returned to the book in his lap. "She was also rather…vain."

I snorted in disbelief at the irony that the prince disliked a trait he very much possessed himself.

He peered up from his book with raised eyebrows.

"Is something amusing?"

"I admit I'm surprised as to your opinion on the matter, considering vanity is an expected trait

amongst the court."

He turned a page in his book, his movements rigid. "By some, but not by me. That shallow girl

cared nothing for me as a person. Good riddance she's gone."

I gaped at him. “But…she was the woman you were to marry. You must have loved her.”

He suddenly snapped his book shut, his friendly manner gone, expression cold. “I didn’t love her.

Our arrangement was solely a political alliance, forged by my father without my consent. Yet I was

forced to honor it, sacrificing all my hopes for my own future, all for the sake of *duty*.” He spat the

word out like a curse. “I wanted to choose whom to give my heart to and spend the rest of my life

with…but that opportunity was stolen from me. All for someone who only saw the title rather than the

man himself.”

As he spoke, another layer of warts appeared along his previously well-defined jaw, a

manifestation of the dark feelings tainting his heart. Ah, so *that* was the emotion that had triggered the

effects of the curse: not conceit like I’d assumed, but…bitterness. This bitterness darkened his entire

expression, lining his voice with coldness and causing frustration to dim his eyes, eclipsing the

friendliness that he’d previously exhibited.

I felt a moment of satisfaction. I’d discovered the source of the prince’s dark heart, a bitterness

that must run deep to have disfigured him so completely, further proof he’d deserved the punishment

I’d inflicted. It was a shame I had to find a way to reverse it considering it already appeared to be

doing its intended job of humbling him.

The prince heaved a weary sigh. “That is the sad tale of the now disfigured prince: duty robbing

me of choice, a forced alliance, and being seen for one thing and nothing else.“ He clenched his teeth

as his frustration mounted. “But though my curse freed me of my shackles of political contracts and a

woman interested solely in my looks and title, it’s also doomed me to another loveless prison, for

what chance do I have to find love when no one will ever be able to see beyond the beast to the man

inside?”

Silence followed his outburst, save for his sharp, angry breaths. I gaped at the frustration twisting

his expression, one that left me breathless. I was unsure what to say, my words having fled. He must

have realized he’d spoken too much, for he hastily regathered his composure, tucking all his emotions

away…save for embarrassment.

“Forgive me, I shouldn’t have been so open. I don’t know why I—” He gave his head a rigid

shake. “I’ll leave you to your search for a far more cheerful story than my own.” He ducked behind

his book, signaling the end of this unexpected conversation.

But surprisingly, I wasn't quite ready for it to be over. My mind whirled with the revelations from

his unexpected confessions. I almost felt sorry for him, but reminded myself that considering his

pampered life, his self-pity was laughable. "I had no idea it was so *difficult* to be royalty." I realized

I shouldn't have spoken the words out loud when he snapped his book shut once more, looking truly

annoyed now.

"Of course you didn't. No one seems to expect royals to have *feelings*, especially not my own

father. It never occurred to him that his son wanted something more than the cold, unfeeling marriage

he himself has. No one expects a prince to hate having to pretend to be someone he's not just to fit the

expectations placed upon him. Nor does anyone seem to find value in a prince beyond his looks and

title. Now that they're gone I'm left with nothing." His expression crumpled. "I have nothing."

And without another word, he stood and left the library with agitated strides, slamming the door

behind him.

For a moment I stared after him, my heart pounding rapidly as it wrestled with a myriad of

emotions I wasn’t currently strong enough to experience. Desperate for a distraction, my gaze drifted

to the book he’d left behind on the window seat, my curiosity compelling me closer to steal a peek at

the title.

I gaped. A book of…poetry? Why would a stuffy prince read such a thing? But the answer was

obvious: the prince might not have been exactly who I’d thought he was.

C H A P T E R 6

M y interaction with Prince Gladen haunted me for days afterwards, making it

impossible to focus on my magic studies, a lapse in concentration I couldn’t afford

when my powers were still so weak, having still not recovered from the darkness I’d

allowed to taint them.

As a result of my fading magic—as well as penance for the actions that had led to it—Enchantress

Ivy had not only postponed my upcoming exam but had been giving me fewer tasks, leaving nothing to

distract me from my confusing thoughts concerning the prince, even though a distraction was

something I desperately needed.

When I’d first met Prince Gladen, I’d believed I’d had him all figured out: he was quite obviously

handsome and princely, yet conceited. But after our time together in the library, he now seemed…

different. He'd been friendly, even charming, despite the curse tainting his skin. It left me unsettled.

The fact that the prince wasn't what I'd expected haunted me, as did the doubt the realization

brought with it. If Prince Gladen wasn't who I'd thought, had I been wrong to curse him? Guilt always

followed these questions, an unwanted emotion that made it impossible to concentrate on my magic

studies.

I couldn't endure these unsettling thoughts a moment longer. Desperate, I went in search of

Enchantress Ivy and found her in the preparation room, brewing up a spell to entertain the king's

guests later this evening. "I need a task. Please, Ivy."

"A task? Hmm." She paused in her stirring to ponder my request and I waited with bated breath,

hoping that despite everything that had happened, she still possessed enough trust in me to mercifully

grant me one. When she remained silent too long, I stepped closer, my eyes wide and imploring.

"It need not be a big one; a small one will do. I just need to do something, *anything*."

It was doubtful she'd trust me with anything too large or important; she hadn't said as much, but I

sensed I was on an unspoken probation, a thought that was unbearable; magic had always been a part

of my life—my refuge that brought me light no matter the darkness surrounding me. How could I live

without it?

But if my powers didn't fully return or I didn't find a way to break the curse on the prince, I

feared I'd soon find out.

Enchantress Ivy watched me with a thoughtful pucker. "It seems to me you should be spending

your time trying to find a way to break the curse."

I shifted guiltily. I'd initially spent hours this past week searching every book I could find for any

hint of a way to reverse the spell I'd created, yet it was as if the answer had vanished into thin air, or

perhaps no countercurse to atone for my mistakes existed.

My lack of progress had caused me to repeatedly bury my discouragement in hours of reading or

spending time with my sister rather than trying to find another avenue. "I *tried*, Ivy, but I'm at a loss as

to *how*; I seem to be hitting nothing but dead ends."

She tilted her head. "You really don't have any ideas?"

I nibbled my lip. As I considered, my gaze flickered over the ingredients scattered across the

table where Ivy worked, a variety of plants and carefully crafted potions. An idea slowly formed,

inspired by something I'd learned at the beginning of my magic studies: every property used in magic

had an opposite. What if…

My mind slowly worked through this hypothesis, examining it from every angle. "Could I create a

countercurse by taking each of the ingredients I used to create the curse and creating another spell that

is its complete opposite? Will that work?" I looked at Enchantress Ivy expectantly.

"That is for you to discover." She waved her hand and a piece of parchment bearing her familiar

handwriting appeared and floated towards me. On it was scrawled a list of the ingredients I'd used to

create the curse.

I rummaged through the nearby shelf for the encyclopedia of magical ingredients and herbs and

settled in a chair in front of the hearth to begin looking up each of the curse's ingredients. The process

was arduous and required me to cross reference several tomes in order to ensure accuracy, but

eventually I had a new list of ingredients. Now all that was left was to gather them.

I looped a basket through my arm and turned to leave but paused when I caught sight of the

knowing glint glistening in Ivy's eyes. "What is it?"

"Nothing." But her twitching lips betrayed her lie. "Have a good time. I hope you find what

you're looking for."

I doubted I would…unless I discovered magic lingering in the forest that could be bottled.

I left out the back door, my spellbook following close behind. While the front part of the

enchantress's cottage faced the palace, the back opened up to the vast woods, packed with foliage that

harbored all manner of magical properties and ingredients, all within easy access for whatever

potions and spells we might need them for.

I took one of many well-worn paths that twisted its way deeper into the thicket. The breeze

smelled of pine and the day was bright and pleasant, such a contrast to the dark uncertainty crowding

my mind. Normally I took great solace in my walks through the woods, especially after the peace it'd

brought me in the months following each of my parents' deaths.

But it brought no solace now. All I could think about were my fading, darkness-tainted powers

and the interaction with the prince that hadn't gone at all like I'd expected, the memory of his warm

manner and charming smile…

I gave my head a rigid shake. The last thing I wanted was to humor the conceited prince by

thinking of him, but my mind had no sooner traversed that familiar path than guilt knotted my stomach.

Our interaction in the library had only proven that as far as the prince's conceit was concerned, I'd

sorely misjudged him. I bit my lip to suppress a sigh. How I hated being in the wrong.

I forcefully pushed lingering thoughts of His Highness away and consulted my list. The first item I

needed to gather were toadstools, and I knew the perfect area to find them. Happy to have a purpose, I

marched to the clearing, where I foraged not only toadstools, but several herbs, flowers, and berries,

all while my spellbook happily soared through the trees, keeping close by.

I was just starting on removing some elder tree bark when a chuckle pierced the tranquil silence,

causing me to still. I listened intently, but other than the twittering of birds and the gentle breeze

swaying through the leaves, all was silent. I was just beginning to wonder whether I'd imagined it

when the sound repeated, coming from nearby.

I slowly straightened and scanned the nearby trees. My breath caught when my gaze settled on the

prince himself, sitting beneath a shady oak, fully engrossed in a thick book. He chuckled again.

I immediately scowled. What was *he* doing here? In all the hours I'd spent in the woods, I'd never

encountered anyone else, much less His Highness. The odds of my doing so now…

I frowned suspiciously as I recalled the mischievous look Ivy had given me as I'd left on my

errand. Had she somehow known I'd encounter the prince and encouraged my foraging for that very

purpose? With how powerful she was, I didn't doubt the possibility.

I told myself to leave before the prince noticed me, but I found myself watching him instead. A

sliver of sunlight penetrated his shady canopy to illuminate his face, still distorted and scarred, yet his

features were calm and relaxed, making him look almost… *not* ugly.

I startled when my spellbook gave me an encouraging nudge from behind before tucking itself

under some of the plants in my basket and going still, pretending to be a normal book rather than

magical. With its encouragement, I spent a minute struggling to recast my spell of disguise and

ensuring it fully cloaked me before I nervously ventured forward.

The prince looked up at the sound of my footsteps. At first he merely stared, looking almost

puzzled by my presence…and for a moment of paranoia I wondered if my spell hadn't worked and he

recognized me as the enchantress who'd cursed him.

But then he dispelled these worries with a large, boyish grin that almost caused his cursed

appearance to melt away. I stared, almost breathless.

"I remember you," he said warmly. "I was hoping to encounter you again. Lady Dahlia, was it?"

I didn't answer at first, still too startled by his unexpected presence. My heart hammered wildly

to be near him and I told myself I was apprehensive because of the tense way our last interaction had

ended. Yet the prince seemed friendly, even cheerful. He wouldn't behave in such a way towards me

if he knew the truth behind his curse.

He was awaiting my response, so I managed a nod, which earned me another grin. "And I'm

Prince Gladen, in case my appearance didn't give my identity away." He winked.

His kind manner and wink only deepened my unease and I felt the strangest inclination to

apologize—not for the curse, of course, but for the way our last encounter had ended—yet the words

wouldn't come.

"I don't recall seeing you in the woods before, Your Highness," I managed instead.

"I come to the forest often, though admittedly not as often as I'd like."

As he spoke, he bookmarked his book, not seeming bothered I'd interrupted him, such a contrast

to how he'd treated Rosemarie when she'd disturbed him in the rose garden. I tried to

inconspicuously eye the title, finding myself curious despite myself. Was it another book of poetry?

He noticed and chuckled, causing me to hastily look away with a heated blush.

"You can look; it's not a secret." He held the book up to reveal the title: it was a book of legends.

"I have others, too." He motioned to the large stack beside him, the top book of which was a tome of

mathematics, a rather unconventional subject for a prince.

"No poetry?" I asked. He raised his eyebrows in silent question before he slowly grinned. The

heat swarming my cheeks deepened at my previous nosiness back in the library having been caught.

"Actually, I do have a volume here." He rummaged through his stack and withdrew a thin book,

different than the one he'd been reading the other day. "But I've already finished it. I've spent most of

the day here. Without meetings or the pressures of court, I find I have plenty of free time to spend

'hunting'." He made quote signs with his fingers.

I raised my eyebrows. "Hunting?" Only then did I notice his bow and quiver of arrows lying

discarded near the feet of his accompanying guard who stood several yards away, as if the prince had

tossed them unceremoniously aside at the earliest opportunity.

He nodded. “It’s my code word, an excuse to venture into the woods for a reason that will

appease my father without letting him know what I’m really up to.”

Which was a lot of reading, apparently. “You don’t like hunting?”

He pulled a face. “Not at all. In truth, I’m a rather dismal hunter; the animals in the woods are

never safer than when I make an attempt to find them.” He chuckled to himself, a rather warm,

appealing sound. Not that I noticed.

I stared in surprise. “But isn’t hunting what princes do?”

He shrugged. “I suppose it’s a common past time for most princes, more so than reading, I

daresay. But I find it far more worthwhile to read; an educated king will be far more useful to his

people than one who focuses solely on sport. So I often come to the woods to *pretend* to hunt and

instead spend time with my books. The charade is all to satisfy one of the many demands of my

father.” He leaned closer, as if to impart a great secret. “But though I read all manner of useful

subjects, I can’t resist the occasional indulgence.”

“That being poetry and legends?” It was so unexpected, and I was tired of the unexpected with

him.

He nodded. “Exactly. A bookish prince is considered to be of little value in the royal court. If they

found out…think of the scandal.” He chuckled again, a sound that was growing more alluring each

time.

“I find bookish princes are much more interesting. Reading is one of my fondest past times.” The

admission escaped before I could check it.

His grin widened, his enthusiasm contagious. “You enjoy reading? What are your favorite

subjects?”

I almost shared about how much I adored my magic studies before I forced myself to swallow the

confession. He could never know that.

“Fairytales. I used to read them to my sister.” But it had been years since we’d spent our time

together in such a way, not since I’d grown so busy with my magic studies, a negligence which pained

me. I silently promised myself to do better now that my current inability to practice my magic left me

with more time.

“I occasionally enjoy a good fairytale,” Prince Gladen said. “My governess used to read them to

me as a boy. Perhaps I should read them again, especially considering my own tale seems to be

unfolding much like those I used to read.”

“I’d imagine a prince who indulges in fairytales is almost more scandalous than one who studies

for pleasure.”

He chuckled. “True. Thus, both must be kept a carefully guarded secret. I warrant you can be

trusted? Though even if you can’t, I daresay my reputation can’t get any worse after what’s

happened.”

For the first time since our interaction had begun, his good humor faltered, revealing the sadness

in his eyes, which sent an unwanted pang through me for what I’d done.

“I’m…sorry.” The words escaped before I could contain them.

His eyebrows lifted. “Sorry? Whatever do you have to be sorry about?”

I struggled to speak, but my mouth had gone dry. I couldn’t admit what I’d done, not now. “I—for

—” I scrambled for a reason to apologize before settling on the lesser of the two evils. “For…my

behavior during our last interaction. I was rude and spoke out of turn, and I fiercely regret it.”

He seemed puzzled for a moment before understanding settled over him. “Oh, I see. Thank you for

your apology. You are forgiven.” He extended it so easily, forgiving far more willingly than I ever

could…or had. The thought only made me more uneasy.

I wondered whether this would be the end of our interaction and he’d return to his reading-rather-

than-hunting. But he didn’t. Instead he kept his book closed and motioned for me to join him with the

same look I’d seen in the library, the one that made me suspect he was lonely.

Against my better judgement sympathy tugged on my heart, compelling me to linger despite my

good sense ordering me to leave. But there was something more that kept me here: the unresolved

mystery behind who the prince truly was.

I stepped closer, my body acting on the decision I hadn’t consciously made. As if only just

remembering his manners, he stood with a bow, as if he were greeting me at a formal ball rather than

out in the woods. Standing brought his face more fully into the sunlight. I stared, slowly taking in the

work done by my curse—warts, distortion, disfigurement, all of which caused the knots invading my

stomach to tighten further. This wasn’t what I wanted my powers to be known for.

My thoughts had caused me to slow, almost hesitant, and Prince Gladen's easygoing smile

faltered. He shifted nervously and cast his eyes downward. "I—are you too uncomfortable to be

alone with me?"

My brow furrowed. "Why would I be uncomfortable?" Considering I was the one who'd cast his

spell and shared in the curse as well, I was the last one who needed to worry about what proximity to

the prince could do. I looked at my own hands, which only appeared smooth because of the

concealment spell, and bit my lip to suppress a sigh.

He frowned, clearly unconvinced. "Because of how I look…it's always seemed to matter before."

A wave of sympathy I didn't want to feel washed over me, dispelling the resentment that used to

fill my heart. I tilted my head and studied him. It was strange, but…his appearance didn't look quite

as beastly as it had before. Instead I felt as if I was really seeing him for the first time…and it'd taken

a curse for me to do so.

"I truly don't mind." And to prove my sincerity, I settled beside him on the grass, closer than was

likely proper. My spellbook still lingering in my basket subtly shook its disapproval, but I ignored it.

He stared first at me then at the small distance between us, all with wide, almost disbelieving

eyes, before slowly lowering himself back to the grass. “Are you certain? Considering what I look

like now, I’d understand if…” He trailed off.

“Why are you so worried?” I asked.

He lowered his eyes. “I’m not used to anyone seeking out my company for the sake of myself.”

“I don’t see why,” I said stiffly, almost begrudgingly, still annoyed with myself with how I’d

gotten everything so terribly wrong before. “You’re pleasant company.”

“*Am* I?” He sounded so startled by this assessment that my sympathy for him only deepened.

“I think so.” And to my surprise I found I truly meant it.

He averted his gaze, suddenly looking rather shy. “Forgive me for marring an otherwise pleasant

conversation with my insecurities. I’m certainly making a muddle of things. I…don’t really know how

to talk to women.”

“But you’re a prince. Haven’t you spent a lot of time with women of the court?”

“I’ve been *around* women,” he corrected. “But rarely have I talked with them beyond a

superficial level. Conversation is rather difficult when they’re fawning over me.”

Before today I would have found such a statement conceited, but now I recognized the weariness

in his eyes as he made this assessment, eyes which were still a deep, pretty blue despite the curse.

“That does sound exhausting.” I admitted. “But surely there have been exceptions. Didn’t you

converse with your former fiancée?”

He shook his head. “Even when we were practically engaged, she spent as little time in my

company as possible. She found me dull. We were certainly well-suited in that regard.” Sarcasm

hardened his tone even as bitterness transformed his expression. “Did you know she agreed to the

match before she even had a chance to meet me?”

“Isn’t that common amongst political arrangements?” I asked.

Disgust twisted his features. “Such arrangements are more than that—they’re like an auction, with

me as the prize. My *intended*”—he spat the word out like a curse—”never cared for me. All she

needed was my portrait to convince her. Or perhaps it was the fact that marrying me would make her

queen, take your pick.”

His tone was hardening, bringing with it another line of warts across his cheek to join the ones

already marring his skin, a manifestation of the bitterness that filled his heart.

“You want a woman to see you?” I asked gently.

He sighed. “I know it’s impossible. Even before *this* happened to me, I was already cursed, just

in a different way; being a prince is its own sentence. Yet I still foolishly hoped that perhaps one day

I’d meet someone who’d be different, or that miraculously my intended would eventually care for *me*

rather than what I could give her, but now…I’ve lost even the *possibility* of love.”

He glared at his wart-covered hand, which only caused more warts to appear. His eyes widened

at his hand before he hastily lowered it, as if unable to bear looking at it. Instead, he began pulling up

the grass by handfuls and breaking the strands apart with his fingers, his gaze wandering, as if

embarrassed or seeking a distraction. It was soon drawn to my basket and his grin returned, softening

his features.

“What do you have there?”

He reached for my basket but I protectively clutched its handle, a blush warming my cheeks.

“Just…some herbs, mushrooms, flowers…”

His eyebrows rose. “Ah, so foraging is what brought you to the woods?”

My mouth went dry and I was at a loss as to what to say. I couldn't very well admit the true

purpose of these ingredients was for magic…a countercurse specifically. The more I got to know the

prince, the less I wanted him to ever find out our true connection.

His brows lifted further as he eyed the way I shielded the basket from his view and he only

looked more intrigued. "Ah, so that basket contains more than herbs and flora, but also… *secrets*." He

wriggled his eyebrows.

Despite my nervousness, an unexpected laugh escaped my lips before I could suppress it. "I'm

afraid my basket's contents aren't quite so interesting as that."

"Really? Then why are you trying to hide it?" His grin was teasing and annoyingly endearing,

causing me to soften my tense posture.

I was drawing far too much attention to myself by being so anxious. I reluctantly loosened my tight

hold on the basket and scooted it forward so he could peer inside, which he did with rather adorable

boyish eagerness. His eyes lit up as he sorted through its contents.

"What a fantastic collection. While many of these plants are familiar, there are several I don't

recognize. If only I'd brought my field journal so I could study them properly."

The prince had his own field journal? I ached to tell him of my own, of the hours I'd spent

outdoors with it, soaking up as much knowledge as I could and carefully chronicling it in my

notebook. I felt a sudden urge to compare them with the prince's, exchanging notes, stories…before

realizing such a thing would be impossible when so many of my observations centered around magic.

Already I was growing tired of all I was being forced to hide about myself.

Prince Gladen continued rummaging through my basket with interest, which was soon replaced by

a thoughtful pucker. He lifted his gaze. "Why have you gathered such an array of ingredients? Are you

an herbalist?"

I understood his incredulity. Such a profession was uncommon for the noblewoman he mistook me

for. I hesitated before nodding—yet another lie, though it was at least somewhat close to the truth. To

my surprise, my admission only seemed to intrigue him.

"That's wonderful. I admire you for taking a path different than the one expected of you. I wish I

possessed such bravery."

"But you do," I protested. "Despite the dictates placed upon you, you haven't given up on the

things that bring you joy." I motioned to his stack of books.

He brightened. “You really think so?”

I managed a nod.

His lips curved up in an endearing grin that caused my heart to give a strange *tug*, one that

frightened me. This fear only deepened with the way the prince looked at me, his blue eyes soft. It

was a relief when he tore the force of his gaze away to return it to my basket, his attention quickly

captured by my spellbook.

It had been behaving itself throughout our exchange by remaining as still and silent as a regular

book, knowing the importance of my not risking discovery. But considering it was still a book, it was

unsurprising the prince had eventually noticed it.

His gaze lit up when he saw it. “Ah, so I’m not the only one who escapes to the forest to read.”

He reached for it to steal a peek at the title…one that would reveal it to be a book of magic,

exposing my secret.

“Wait, don’t—” I snatched it from his hands before he could flip the volume over; the book gave a

relieved flutter against my palm as I hid it behind my back.

The prince stared a moment, seeming surprised at my rudeness at having snatched something from

him, something that had likely never occurred before. But the look vanished almost immediately,

replaced by amusement.

“I knew secrets were hidden in this basket, but I never expected them to be found within a book.

What is it, a *romance novel*?” Once more he wriggled his brows.

My spellbook gave an annoyed rustle to be confused for such a thing; I stroked my thumb along the

spine in hopes of soothing it.

“Yes,” I stammered. “Thus it’s far too fluffy for such a *princely* prince like yourself.”

He laughed and held his hands up in a conceding gesture. “Perhaps that’s one *princely* quality I’ll

readily embrace. I admit romance is one of the few genres I never read… although remedying that

might prove useful. A man who previously only had political arrangements never needed to learn how

to woo a woman, but I find myself now growing more interested in the topic.”

My breath caught, and in that moment, a strange energy passed between us, one that only deepened

when he scooted closer with an intense look. In it, it was as if he saw something in me that he’d been

desperately searching for, something he wanted to learn more about, a prospect which terrified me.

What was happening between us? This was the man I used to hate, one I'd cursed, one I wasn't

supposed to forge a friendship with, yet one growing more likable than I could have ever believed. I

was meant to figure out how to break his curse, nothing more. Whatever *this* was was a distraction

from my true purpose. I needed to leave before I got further entangled in…in whatever was happening

here.

I hastily stood. "I'm afraid I must go."

He blinked up at me, suddenly looking rather lost. "Please don't leave. I wish to converse with

you more." He sounded almost desperate.

"I'm afraid I cannot comply; I have duties to attend to."

His shoulders slumped and he looked undeniably disappointed. "Very well. I hope you enjoy the

rest of your day." He hesitated a moment before his next words escaped in a rush, as if he hastened to

speak them before losing his nerve. "I come to the forest often. Perhaps… I'll see you here again?"

His voice hitched in hope, and with alarm I realized that I too desired to encounter him again, a rather

alarming thought.

To break the curse, I reminded myself, for other than a bit of foraging for some ingredients for a

potential countercurse, I'd made little effort to try today. But that would change the next time I saw

him, it *had* to.

Not trusting myself to speak, I nodded once more before hurrying from the clearing, fully aware of

the prince's soft gaze watching me until I disappeared from view. It took every ounce of willpower

not to look back.

It wasn't until I stepped out of the forest a quarter of an hour later that I relaxed my tense posture.

I leaned against an elm with a heavy sigh. What was *wrong* with me? It took me a moment to sort

through my whirl of thoughts in order to realize the truth: I no longer hated the prince. In fact, I found

him rather…amiable, as if he'd been the one to cast a spell on me, rather than the other way around.

What was happening to me, and more importantly, how did I stop it?

I glanced back towards the clearing where I'd left the prince with a sinking feeling. Even the few

short interactions we'd had were enough to cause me to fear that I'd made a terrible mistake.

C H A P T E R 7

M y spellbook gave an aggravated rustle as I slammed it shut in frustration. Enchantress

Ivy glanced over from where she worked on a spell, the embodiment of calm, an

emotion that eluded me. I felt as if I were trapped in a dark labyrinth with no way out,

my weakened powers unable to create even the smallest glimmer of light to guide me.

So far the makeshift counterspell I'd been attempting over the past week wasn't coming together

like I'd hoped. My powers hadn't even been adequate enough to make much of whatever I'd managed

so far—finding the correct ingredients was proving an arduous task, and I couldn't even begin to

guess the amounts to use of those I had acquired or the order to combine them. I was becoming more

and more discouraged and impatient in my need to find a solution—a need that had strangely grown

ever since my recent encounter with the prince. But as before, none could be found.

What good was my magic when it couldn't *fix* anything? Instead it'd only made everything worse.

Your magic wasn't what led to your predicament, my conscience prickled. *It was your choices.*

You and you alone chose this path, despite deep down knowing that dark magic shouldn't be

tampered with…

Despair, heavy and relentless, pressed against me. I rested my hands on the table and leaned over

my spellbook.

My sister paused mid-hum from where she read near the hearth. “Are you alright, Astrid?”

At the sound of Rosemarie’s sweet voice I spun around to face her, where I found her watching

me, wide eyes clouding with concern.

I forced a smile. “I’m fine.” The last thing I wanted was for her to worry.

She frowned, clearly unconvinced. “But you’re not. You haven’t been yourself all week.

Something is clearly troubling you.”

Of course it was. I was trapped in a prison of my own making with no clear path forward. I

rubbed my hand along my arm, where beneath my sleeve the curse had spread, too far for me to be

able to adequately cover it all with magic. But it was no longer anger that fueled the curse’s power,

but the crushing helplessness that swirled like a constant cloud around me.

Yet while I’d endured such a dark state, my sister seemed to be doing much better. Despite her

concern for me now, light still filled her expression, dispelling the last of her heartache from Prince

Gladen’s rejection. Guilt twinged my heart at the friendly interaction the prince and I had shared, one

entirely inappropriate for how much he'd hurt my sister.

I stepped forward and took her hands. "How are *you*, Rosemarie? Are you doing well?"

Her eyes lit up as she nodded, an assurance that did wonders for my darkening mood. "I am." Her

cheeks pinked and she suddenly looked rather shy.

"What is it?" I asked, but instead of answering, she only smiled.

Based on her accompanying blush and shy smile, I hoped her mood was because a new man had

caught her eye. Despite my burning curiosity over the details, I decided not to press her. I gave her

hands a squeeze.

"I'm truly glad you're doing better."

It was unsurprising. While I'd spent my time pursuing darkness in my quest for revenge—a path

that had only led to my own misery—my sister had chosen the nobler one. But surely it wasn't too late

for me to change my own course.

Rosemarie rose from her chair, and after a quick kiss on my cheek she left to tend her flower stand

in the village. The moment the door closed behind her, my gaze was drawn to the vase resting on the

windowsill, where the cursed rose resided, its vibrant crimson petals still in full bloom, a constant

reminder of the enchantment it possessed. It was almost haunting in its beauty, with no hint of the dark

magic harbored within.

The sight of it caused anger to flare in my breast, hot and burning. I stomped over to the vase to

seize the rose. I tried to crush it within my fist, only to discover when I unclenched my fingers that it

remained unharmed, the curse's magic acting as an unyielding barrier.

"It won't wilt or die on its own."

I spun around to face Enchantress Ivy, who watched with her usual composure, which had no

place midst my frustration. "Every curse can be broken," I said. "If it can't be done by creating a

reversal spell or by destroying the magic's base, then what *is* the solution?"

I expected her to remain elusive, just as she'd always been since I'd found myself in this mess,

but instead sympathy softened her expression.

"The answer is actually rather simple when one understands the nature of the magic at work here:

the curse's power comes from the dark emotions overshadowing the prince's heart…and yours." Her

gaze flickered down to my hand, where the weak concealment spell continued to act as a mask for the

curse's effect on my skin.

I returned my gaze to the rose, deep crimson yet with a shimmery black glow about it, only

discernible to my magic-trained observation. The warts covering my skin prickled as I traced each of

the flower's petals, a reminder of not only the magic that afflicted it, but the emotions that had led to

the curse—my sister's past heartache…and my own. But while her heartache had healed, mine still

remained.

Yet if my sister's heart could be changed to become whole once more, and if my own could begin

to see past my initial impression of the prince, could whatever darkness was deep inside me be

rooted out?

"How do I change my heart?" I asked. "I've been trying, and yet…"

Enchantress Ivy considered. "The problem has been your focus. From the moment you noticed the

curse backfired, your motivation has primarily been to break the curse on *yourself*, not Prince

Gladen. Perhaps if you look outward you can heal your heart, and in the process you can learn what is

tainting the prince's."

While I'd come to better understand in part what was tainting the prince's heart—bitterness that

nobody saw him for himself—I was still at a loss on how to weed out the emotion. Apprehension

washed over me at the daunting task before me, but for a far different reason than when I'd first faced

it several weeks ago. I wasn't entirely sure what had accounted for this change, or what exactly this

change was, only that it left my heart pounding wildly.

I wrung my hands. "But how will that fix anything? I've already spoken to Prince Gladen on two

occasions, yet nothing has changed."

Ivy tilted her head. "Hasn't it? Doesn't the fact that you feel enough remorse that you now *want* to

break the curse on the prince mean things aren't what they once were?"

Her eyes glistened knowingly, and not for the first time I wondered whether she could read my

mind. My shoulders slumped in defeat.

"I admit…that the prince isn't entirely what I expected…" But the admission had no sooner

escaped than my stubbornness stirred, causing me to straighten. "But that doesn't change the fact that

he did treat Rosemarie poorly, despite their shared history."

Ivy's look became searching. "It appears there's another emotion within your heart aside from

resentment or even your current feelings of helplessness: *pride*. Why are you having such a difficult

time fully admitting you're in the wrong?"

I bit my lip. While I now realized I'd misjudged the prince and *perhaps* shouldn't have cursed

him, there was *something* hidden within his heart that had caused him to treat Rosemarie the way he

had, and until I fully understood this part of him, I couldn't allow myself to entirely forgive him. For

if I did…then I'd have to fully face the reality of what I'd done, something I wasn't quite ready to do.

A few additional warts appeared, sharp and prickling, against my cheek, followed by several

along my back, just above my collar. Oh, bother.

When I gave no response save for a stubbornly lifted chin, Ivy sighed wearily. "It appears you're

still in need of some guidance, so allow me to leave you a bit of wisdom: to reach the level of magic

you desire requires the humility to not only know when one has made a mistake, but to *admit* it.

Remorse is the first step to true change."

And with those words she departed for her afternoon appointments, leaving me alone with my

whirling thoughts. I had no distraction from my guilt and regret, my ever-present companions, making

it impossible to focus on today's tasks or my flimsy powers; the cauldron simmering over the hearth

and the ingredients surrounding me on the table seemed to taunt me, reminding me of the magic I could

no longer perform.

A sudden knock sounded on the door, likely someone seeking out Enchantress Ivy for a spell or

trinket. Despite being unable to help in her stead, the interaction would be a welcome distraction,

providing a much-needed reprieve from my discouragement.

I stepped into the empty parlor and hoisted the front door open, only to discover not a customer,

but—my breath hooked sharply. “Prince Gladen?”

For a moment I was breathless as I stared at him, a reaction I had no logic to account for. Despite

his curse, he appeared rather dashing standing at my door with his warm eyes and boyish smile…both

of which faded the moment he saw me.

At first he seemed just as startled by my presence before his eyes narrowed darkly. Too late I

remembered that I didn’t wear the disguise for Prince Gladen not to recognize me before realizing it

wouldn’t make any sense for Lady Dahlia to answer the door at the Royal Enchantress’s cottage,

leaving me no choice but to confront the prince as myself.

I braced myself for his reaction at being faced with the enchantress who’d cursed him. As I

anticipated, his entire manner hardened; gone was the friendly manner I'd grown accustomed to

during our time together, and even though that prince was still new to me, I was left unsettled by the

coldness eclipsing his manner now.

"Enchantress Astrid," he said through gritted teeth.

I flinched at the iciness of his normally polite tone, one that was surprisingly already familiar to

me, even after so short a time.

I wasn't prepared for this confrontation and wanted nothing more than to hide behind my disguise.

Even though the prince had no way of connecting me to Lady Dahlia, I still didn't want him to see me

for who I truly was: one who'd allowed her anger to lead her to behave impulsively.

"Can I help you, Your Highness?" I shakily managed when I'd found my voice.

"No, you cannot; I want nothing more to do with you or your magic."

His reaction was understandable, but his words and the way he flung them at me like daggers cut

deep, as did the anger and hatred swirling in his eyes, all of which I knew I deserved. And perhaps

that truth was what hurt the most.

"I came here seeking Enchantress Ivy," he said. "If you'd be so kind as to retrieve her…"

I made no motion to heed his request, which only deepened the darkness marring his expression.

As if his anger and bitterness were giving the curse power, his features distorted further.

“Oh, do you first need a moment to gloat?” He pushed his sleeves up. “Look at your handiwork.

I’m not sure what you sought to accomplish, but if it was to make your prince entirely insignificant to

those in the royal world I’m forced to be a part of, then you succeeded.”

His harsh words broke through my shock at seeing him. “You speak of such things as if it matters

when, in truth, I know your world is one you place little value in.”

The words escaped before I could check them. I stiffened. Would he wonder how I had acquired

such knowledge about him?

His eyebrows rose. “An interesting insight.”

I shifted beneath his perusal. I ached for the prince to leave so I might avoid this inevitable

confrontation and before I incriminated myself further—yet at the same time I wanted him to linger

simply because I’d already grown to enjoy his company. A most perplexing inward battle.

“I didn’t come here to speak with you, but now that I have the opportunity, I can’t resist asking…

why did you do it?" His manner had changed, becoming less hardened and more…desperate, as if he

needed to know the reason. But that was something I couldn't give him. I wasn't completely sure why,

only that the thought of trying to defend my decision to him left me with heavy dread.

"There is always a reason behind every magic an enchantress performs, and curses are no

exception," I responded vaguely. "Just know I didn't make the decision to do what I did lightly."

Though admittedly I had made it rather impulsively.

"Yet you made the decision nonetheless," he said stiffly. "Have you failed to remember that I'm a

prince? And with my position, I have the power to remove you from your own."

Though I now knew the prince well enough to suspect that he wouldn't truly do such a thing, his

threat still nourished my fear that I'd lost a future filled with magic.

The thought left me suddenly weary. I leaned against the doorframe with a sigh. "Whether or not

you want my assistance, it's my duty to help you in any way that I can. Why are you here?"

My lack of defensiveness seemed to catch him off guard, and for a moment he looked as if he was

debating whether or not to tell me. "I'm in need of a spell," he finally said. "Again, *not* from you; I no

longer trust your magic."

I winced, even though the attack was justly deserved. "I'm afraid my magic is all that is currently

available, for Enchantress Ivy is out for the afternoon. Perhaps I can tell her what spell you're in need

of."

"That's none of your concern." His words were clipped, and again I missed the easygoing manner

and laughter we'd experienced during our previous encounters, as well as how open he'd been with

me while I was disguised. But not even a portion of the trust he'd given "Lady Dahlia" could ever be

extended to the enchantress who'd cursed him.

Yet I foolishly wanted some of it all the same. "I'll find out what you need eventually; as

Enchantress Ivy's apprentice, I assist her with many of her spells." I gave him a shaky smile, which he

did not return, causing my own to falter.

"I understand your role under the Royal Enchantress," he said. "But while I know that you assist

her, what I'm curious about is whether she, in return, assists *you*."

I knew what he was truly asking. "Enchantress Ivy had no part in what befell you," I said fiercely.

"I acted alone."

“I see. Does she know what you’ve done to me? I know it’s been deliberately kept quiet from

everyone else; it wasn’t lost on me that *someone’s* magic hid the truth from my parents. The question

remains: whose was it?”

“Hers,” I said. “But her spell can’t keep the truth hidden should you tell them what befell you, and

yet …you haven’t done so?” I raised an eyebrow in silent question.

His look became challenging. “Did you want me to?”

“My opinion matters very little; I wouldn’t expect you to take my feelings into consideration after

everything.”

He tightened his jaw, trapping the words I was certain he wanted to speak. Despite his anger, he

clearly still feared my powers, though he had very little reason to; not only had they weakened ever

since the curse, but I wasn’t inclined to curse him again—but *he* didn’t know that.

For some reason, the fact that he didn’t know this about me made me achingly sad. And suddenly I

wanted nothing more than for this confrontation to end, especially as each moment spent with him only

deepened my remorse.

“You now know Enchantress Ivy is gone for the remainder of the day and you don’t trust me to

allow me to assist you in her stead," I said. "So I will inform her of your visit and allow you to take

your leave. If you'll excuse me, Your Highness, I have work to do."

To my surprise he remained, as if he couldn't make himself leave. "You never fully answered my

question: does Enchantress Ivy know what you've done to me?"

I hesitated a moment. "She does, and I can assure you that she's not at all pleased about it."

He frowned. "And yet she's done nothing to break the curse?"

"It's not so simple. While her magic is powerful, there are rules behind every spell, and curses

are no exception. But there's another reason: she wants me to be the one to take care of it so that it can

serve as a lesson."

He snorted. "A *lesson*? Must I pay the price for your tutelage?" His tone was hardening once

more as he gave full rein to his annoyance. "Haven't I already suffered enough?"

"Is that why you're here?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious? I need *this* removed"—he motioned to his entire face —"and I only trust

Enchantress Ivy to do it."

"I'm afraid she can't. You see, one of the rules of magic is that only the enchantress who cast the

spell can break it."

His mouth thinned. "Which is *you*."

I nodded.

For a moment he said nothing before he released a frustrated breath. "Then I'm doomed."

"Not necessarily," I said. "Though in truth it's more complicated than you might think."

The most pressing matter being that I still had no idea *how* to go about such a daunting task. While

Ivy had hinted I needed to work to heal the prince's heart, I still felt trapped in an endless labyrinth

with no idea which direction to try next.

I folded my arms and surveyed him. "I am curious about something… you've been cursed for

several weeks and yet it's only now that you come seeking help in removing it."

I expected another retort, but his response was instead very different: his cheeks darkened and he

suddenly seemed rather shy. "I—that is—no reason, I just—"

He said nothing more, but the crimson in his cheeks deepened, revealing more than his fumbled

words ever could. "Is there a reason you didn't care about it being removed until now?" I asked.

He lowered his gaze. "I—" Again he said nothing, looking almost… nervous, an emotion which

dispelled his previous coldness. “It’s just that…” He shifted from foot to foot, looking vulnerable and

almost… *sweet*, even with the warts marring his skin. “There’s just…sort of a…”

“A…girl?” I supplied, even as my heart beat wildly at the thought. Which girl could he be talking

about? He couldn’t possibly mean… *Lady Dahlia*, could he? Surely not.

For a moment my mind was numb with shock at the idea that the prince could feel anything for the

woman who, unbeknownst to him, had cursed him. Such a possibility went well beyond the tentative

friendship we were still establishing. I didn’t like the strange flutter my heart gave even entertaining

the ridiculous possibility, a feeling quickly followed by guilt. It’d break my sister’s fragile heart

should the prince develop feelings for me instead of her, a thought I couldn’t bear to consider.

My guess only caused him to become more embarrassed, confirming my suspicion. “It’s just…I’m

no longer engaged,” he said in a rush. “When there was an understanding between me and my

intended, I couldn’t even entertain the notion…but now, for the first time, I have the freedom to

choose…making the curse more of a bother than it was before.”

I frowned. “You’re looking at it all wrong: perhaps the curse can serve as a protection for you. If

a woman can’t see beyond your appearance, then she’d never truly make you happy.”

He sighed. “That sentiment is nice in theory, but with my previous experience…I don’t have

reason to believe it would make a difference. Thus I’m here to plead for mercy. Whatever I have to

do, even if I have to beg, I’ll do it. Please, I need the curse removed.”

My heart wrenched at his desperation, making it nearly impossible to deny him. But deny him I

must, because I didn’t have any other choice.

“I can’t. The thing is…I don’t know how.” My voice sounded very small.

He stared. “Excuse me?”

“I don’t know how,” I repeated, more shakily than before.

“Then summon Enchantress Ivy—” He cut his words off with a sigh. “Right, she can’t. Which

means I’m trapped.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered again, uselessly.

He glared at me. “No, you’re not. You knew full well what you were doing when you cast your

curse. What kind of person are you?”

And without another word he left, walking down the garden path that twisted away from the

cottage. I watched until he turned the corner and disappeared behind a hedge before I slowly closed

the door and leaned against it, where I remained long after Prince Gladen had left, feeling utterly

drained after the confrontation.

His question haunted me: *what kind of person was I?* My choices made the answer clear: I was

an enchantress who abused the sacred power I'd been blessed with.

My helplessness pressed against me, a burden so heavy I didn't think I could continue to bear it,

especially with the memory of his sadness and desperation, his fierce need for love that I hadn't

expected.

He doesn't deserve what I did to him. If only I could turn back time and prevent myself from ever

taking this path. I'd give anything…

I startled from my thoughts at the sudden tingling sensation on my arms. I yanked the sleeve of my

gown up to see that some of the warts that patterned my skin had faded away, as if they'd never been

there at all.

C H A P T E R 8

I bit my lip as I focused on the mayflowers growing beneath the forest's shady canopy and

struggled to penetrate the thick layers blocking my powers. Yet the charm remained

elusive, despite it being a simple spell, one of the earliest I'd ever learned: transforming

a flower into a butterfly, an elementary task considering both species shared many features in

common. I'd been practicing in the woods for hours, yet every flower I'd attempted to change

remained distinctly flora. My magic, while still a part of me, felt so distant, making it difficult to

reach for, hold on to, and control.

Undeterred, I reached within myself once again, searching for the familiar glow of magic. Though

I couldn't see it, I sensed its flickering flame, a sign that whatever light was inside me hadn't been

entirely extinguished, though it still remained always just out of reach.

I struggled to push my magic towards the mayflowers. They gave a weak quiver, and for a moment

I thought their white petals shimmered, a sign my magic had at least touched them…but then it faded,

causing the spell to fail and leaving me exhausted.

I sighed. There just wasn't enough magic to use my faded powers the way I used to. I lifted my

palms to examine them. Perhaps I shouldn't have used what little reserves I'd gathered these past

several days on covering my warts. I was ashamed of my vanity. How ironic I'd accused Prince

Gladen of such a trait when all I had to do to find it was look in the mirror.

I stood to take the familiar path out of the forest, walking alone considering my spellbook had

grown bored with my practice not even an hour in and left. The woods were peaceful—cheerful

birdsong filled the branches above, and the gentle breeze carried the scent of pine and wildflowers—

yet it was impossible to find solace in such a tranquil environment with my discouragement tainting

the lovely afternoon and my lingering disappointment that another day in the woods had passed

without encountering a specific “hunter.”

I hadn’t seen Prince Gladen for several days, not since his unexpected visit to the enchantress’s

cottage where he’d talked with the real me. Our confrontation still haunted my thoughts—his cold

anger and despair had increased my own sense of helplessness and compelled me to renew my efforts

to create the potential countercurse.

My hand went to the new rose tucked securely in my cloak. This morning I’d finally procured the

final ingredient and hadn’t wasted a moment creating the new brew out in the garden. The rising sun

and the promise of a beautiful day—opposite of the dark, stormy night I’d cursed the prince—had lent

my magic power. The day had only grown more lovely, making it the perfect one to give the newly

enchanted rose to the prince and cast my countercurse spell…if I could but encounter him.

I stepped out of the forest and ventured into one of the royal gardens, hoping to find him there.

Roses of all colors surrounded me. But my focus was only on the rose I held.

The sunlight glistened off the warts lining my hand as I twirled the cursed flower by its stem.

Though there weren't as many blemishes as before, most still lingered. While my own healing had

begun, I knew I couldn't make any further progress until I met with Prince Gladen.

Without my magic studies to keep me occupied and my sister working longer hours in the village,

I had plenty of time to wait for him. I hoped he'd stroll the grounds today, both so I could see him and

so I could give him the rose I hoped would be the countercurse needed to break his spell.

Nearly an hour passed before I heard footsteps against the cobblestones and spotted the prince

entering the garden. I hastily tucked the cursed rose away and looked up. Prince Gladen strolled the

paths with a book tucked beneath his arm and wearing a pensive frown; he didn't seem to notice me. I

used his distraction to check my magical disguise half a dozen times to ensure it fully covered me,

unable to bear another confrontation.

Prince Gladen finally spotted me and his entire manner immediately lit up, causing my heart to

give a rather pleasant lurch. It was almost strange to see him looking so cheerful after his previous

coldness while interacting with me as Enchantress Astrid.

He eagerly hastened towards me before suddenly pausing with a rather shy look. “Good morning,

Lady Dahlia.” He bowed, his movements sloppy in their rush yet still endearing.

I rose to curtsy. “Your Highness.”

He shifted nervously as I settled back onto the bench, his gaze darting repeatedly to the empty spot

beside me. “Would it be alright if…I joined you?” The look accompanying his request was almost

panicked, as if he was afraid I might say no.

“Of course you may.”

Clearly relieved, he sank onto the bench and perched on the edge, rather close to me, so that by

bridging a few more inches our knees might graze. He cast me a shy smile.

“I’ve been hoping to encounter you, and have used my hunting excuse to escape to the woods so

often that I believe my father is growing suspicious when I continually fail to return with any game,

but no matter which foraging spot I search, you've remained rather elusive."

I shrugged. "Are you surprised? You have yet to master hunting animals, and I'm much more

difficult to catch." I stiffened the moment the words escaped. Had I just said something… *flirtatious*?

By the prince's widening eyes, I had. My cheeks burned. "That is…I—"

My fluster was interrupted with Prince Gladen's hearty laugh. "To think I've purposely neglected

my hunting skills over the years when instead I should have been acquiring them so I could finally put

them to good use. I suppose I can put a bit more effort into the sport with so tempting a reward."

His good humor did little to lessen my embarrassment. What had possessed me to say such a

ridiculous thing to the prince?

My flirtatious behavior must have given him confidence, for his strange shyness faded and he

scooted a bit closer, so that our knees *did* touch. I attempted to salvage my sisterly loyalty by trying

not to focus on the heated, almost ripply sensation such an innocent gesture caused me to feel. It didn't

work.

He leaned closer, his grin rather mischievous. “I suppose the first step in becoming an expert

hunter is to thoroughly study what I’m chasing in order to make her easier to find, and here an

excellent opportunity presents itself: I was hoping for an excuse to get to know you better.”

His words caused my heart to pound so wildly I was certain he could hear it. “I’m afraid I’m not

interesting enough to warrant such a study, Your Highness.”

“Perhaps, but there’s only one way to find out. I shall do my best to uncover all your secrets.”

While his accompanying wink was friendly, it only caused the fear that was never far away to

flare. He couldn’t find out everything, else moments like *this* would never happen between us again.

My worry must have shown in my expression, for the prince’s smile slowly faded. “Lady Dahlia?

Are you—”

“I have something for you.”

I handed him the soft pink countercurse rose, which he reverently accepted. “A hybrid tea rose,”

he murmured. Unlike the night I’d cursed him, he made no motion to disguise his delight or botanical

knowledge as he admired it.

As he gazed at my gift, I reached within myself to access the last of my current reserves for the

spell. The soft golden sunlight and my sincere desire to break the curse upon him both lent their

power, and with each silent word the rose glowed.

His eyes widened. “What—” His words faltered and for a moment he looked almost panicked, as

if remembering the last time he’d been given a rose, but he relaxed at my reassuring smile.

The glistening light faded from the rose’s petals as the spell completed, leaving it appearing

entirely ordinary. I held my breath and waited, my gaze riveted to the warts and blisters marring his

skin, hoping to see them fade…but nothing happened. My shoulders slumped. Once again I’d failed,

leaving me back where I’d started.

Prince Gladen looked up with a curious lift of his brow. “Did you commission Enchantress Ivy to

make a magical rose? Does it do anything special?”

“It’s simply a token; I know how much you admire flowers.”

His responding smile was soft. “I do. I’ll treasure it forever.” He carefully set the rose on the

bench beside him and swiveled to face me. His smile faltered at seeing my expression. “Are you

alright?”

I ached to share the burden my discouragement over my failed countercurse had created, but once

again my secrets kept my true feelings locked away. “You appeared lost in thought about something

when I first entered the gardens.”

He heaved a rather weary sigh. “I was. There’s something greatly troubling me. But that’s not

important. You look rather troubled. Are you sure you’re alright?”

I forced a smile. “I’m fine.”

His brows drew together. “Forgive me, but you don’t *seem* fine. Has something happened since

we last saw one another?”

Little did he know that *he* had happened. Our confrontation burned in my memory, as well as the

difficult emotions it had brought with it. I sighed. “No, I suppose I’m not alright.”

“Might you confide in me?”

I meant to brush off his concern…but then he leaned even closer, his gaze so earnest…and rather

sweet.

As if he possessed the key to the lock protecting my feelings, I found my heart opening against my

will. “I’m afraid I’ve done something I fiercely regret and am at a loss on how to atone for it.”

His expression was immediately sympathetic. “Regret is a rather painful emotion, but whatever it

is you’ve done, surely it couldn’t have been *too* terrible; you’re a kind person.”

I shook my head. “I’m not kind.”

“I beg to disagree. You see, I’m making it my mission to learn all I can about Lady Dahlia, and

I’m confident when I say that you have a good heart.”

Perhaps that *used* to be true. If only it still were. “Good people don’t do what I’ve done.”

He grew thoughtful. “You can be good and yet still make mistakes.”

My heart stirred at his words. My mistake had brought darkness to both me and my magic, and at

times it felt so consuming that I feared nothing could make it disperse. But the prince’s insight sparked

within me a glimmer of hope that perhaps the light I so desperately sought could once again return to

me.

“Even if that’s true, I still must atone for what I’ve done,” I said.

“Such a desire only proves the type of person you truly are.”

Hope touched my heart again, yet not enough for it to fully take root. “Yet I remain lost on how to

do so.”

My shoulders slumped, weary from this riddle's burden and all the failed attempts to break the

curse thus far. Concern softened Prince Gladen's expression as he took in my defeated manner before

he suddenly stood.

I blinked up at him. "What are you doing?"

He didn't answer as he walked to a clump of rose bushes, all blooming in a variety of vibrant

colors. His gaze flickered towards me before selecting a violet rose that matched the color of my

dress. My breath hooked, for purple roses were the royal symbol of the Kingdom of Rosileya, a

flower that had taken several generations to cultivate, making it both rare and precious. Surely he

couldn't be…

He was. I stared in shock as he snapped the rose from the bush and returned to my side. "What are

you doing?" I repeated breathlessly.

"Cheering you up." He held out the rose, silently urging me with his eyes to accept his gift, yet I

found I couldn't move.

"But…I couldn't. That rose—"

"—is the most special one growing on the palace grounds," he said. "That's why I want to give it

to you.”

“But—” I couldn’t even finish my protest.

“Would you deny your prince his gift to you?” He leaned closer, as if to share a secret. “Let it be a

symbol of your worth, of who you truly are, regardless of your mistakes.” And he pressed it into my

hand.

My heart swelled as I accepted it. I stared first at the flower, then up at him, meeting his deep,

soulful gaze with my own. I saw nothing of his outward appearance and distorted features, only the

goodness shining through his eyes. This man was nothing like the beast my assumptions had made him

out to be. But while his gesture deepened the remorse I felt for how sorely I’d misjudged him, it also

strengthened my determination to somehow right my mistake.

I continued to stare at him, taking in his sweet and endearing grin and the bright way his eyes lit

up, and once more felt my heart give a strange tug that was both pleasant and almost painful. I

burrowed my nose into the rose’s soft petals and inhaled its sweet perfume, a lovely scent unlike any

other filling the gardens, and one I was certain I’d remember forever.

I felt my smile grow, which caused his own to light up. “There it is; I knew your smile was around

here somewhere. That alone was worth it."

His words only caused my cheeks to warm and my smile to widen. He was being so sweet, so…

unexpected, healing me rather than the other way around. As much as I welcomed his kindness,

accepting it only escalated my guilt. Surely he wouldn't extend it if he knew who I truly was.

Prince Gladen settled back beside me on the bench, rearranging his book on his lap. My gaze

flickered down to it. "I didn't expect to see you with a book outside the library or forest, where

everyone can see you with it."

He shrugged. "Since my image has already been ruined in other ways, I don't feel the need to hide

who I truly am anymore; I'm tired of pretending. I can't believe I allowed myself to live such an

exhausting charade for so long."

"You are proving quite the unexpected surprise," I said. "I admit I fully believed the image you

portrayed to the world; I thought you rather conceited."

He leaned back on his hands with a heavy sigh. "Perhaps there's some truth to that. Why else

would I do all I could to live up to the grandeur expected of me?" His frown deepened. "Perhaps I'd

resigned myself to playing the part, considering the rest of my life was already unfolding according to

a script of royal expectations that I had no freedom to alter."

"You're altering it now," I said. "You're accepting the expectations placed upon you and taking

responsibility for your life."

He considered my words, and as he did so, some of the warts lining his jaw faded away, a sign of

the progress the prince had made towards healing. My heart lifted in hope…before it faltered at the

prince's heavy sigh.

"I'm *trying*, yet I find myself not succeeding." He motioned to the book in his lap, and, curious, I

glanced at the title…only to stiffen.

"That's a book on magic," I stuttered. "Whatever are you doing with it?"

"Trying to make sense of it." He opened to his bookmarked page, whose heading indicated it was

a section on countercurses. "While in the beginning I relished the freedom this curse gave me, it's

quickly becoming more of a hinderance, so I'm struggling to figure out a way to free myself. But

studying magic is getting me nowhere; it's like reading an ancient language I have no hopes of being

able to decipher, and even if I could, I possess no power of my own to implement it. Yet I must do

something."

"Have you…asked the enchantress who cast the spell?" I wasn't sure what compelled me to ask

such a question, why I felt the sudden and rather intense need to know what he'd thought of the

encounter that had haunted me ever since it'd occurred.

His entire manner changed in an instant, but to my surprise it didn't become hardened like I fully

expected, but rather…sad.

"I did, and I've regretted doing so ever since."

My brow furrowed. "Why? Did the endeavor prove fruitless?"

He sighed and rubbed his temples. "It did, but that's not what's troubling me." He gave me a wry

smile. "This is not a story I should share if I'm desperate to keep in your good graces, but you were

candid with me concerning your own mistakes and regrets, so it only seems fitting I share my own."

I leaned closer. "I may not have so sweet a gesture to offer you as you extended to me, but I do

have a listening ear." I was desperate to do *something* to begin to atone for my offense against him,

but more than that, I wanted to heal his heart, just as he'd begun to heal mine.

"Then prepare to be horrified as you hear how I behaved as an utter cad towards the enchantress,

visiting her with the intent of seeing whether she could break my curse, only to treat her in a manner

that leaves me disgusted with myself."

I listened, my mouth dry. "I'm certain you have every right to be angry towards the one who did

such a horrible thing to you."

He didn't immediately respond. "I initially told myself that very thing as a way to justify my

behavior, believing the enchantress deserved my anger after what she'd done to me. But it wasn't long

after our encounter before I regretted my behavior. I'm not normally so cold towards anyone, at least

not intentionally."

At his words I couldn't help thinking of my sister and the treatment she'd received from the

prince, and while my heart still pained at what she'd been made to endure, there was some

consolation that perhaps it hadn't been intentional like I'd initially assumed.

Prince Gladen sighed. "Yet intentional or not, I still behaved abhorrently. It frightened me how

easily I went against my nature. I want to be a better person than I was. Yet at the time, I was so upset

that I just…" He fell silent.

My heart pounded painfully at his confession, especially at how closely his emotions mirrored my

own. My own anger had caused me to be someone less than my best self, leading me down a path that

had allowed me to break my promises and cause darkness to taint my magic. But now I realized that

the darkness had begun long before I'd cast my curse—it had filled my heart, blinding me to what was

truly before me.

Prince Gladen lifted his wart-covered hands with a frown and examined them, front to back.

"Perhaps I'm not who I think I am. After all, I must have done something horrible for Enchantress

Astrid to curse me in such a way."

"No matter your curse, you're not horrible," I said hastily. "Her choices don't determine your true

character. You're so sweet, so good, and so…" *wonderful*, but I was too shy to admit that particular

sentiment out loud. "We all do things we fiercely regret."

My fingers grazed the petals of the rose the prince had given me, still cradled in my lap, before I

stood and walked to the same rosebush. I plucked another purple rose and returned to hand it to him.

His brows drew together in puzzlement that I found rather endearing.

"Another flower? What's this for?"

I took a wavering breath and repeated the very words he'd spoken earlier. "You can still be good

and yet make mistakes. And you *are* good. You see, I'm making it my mission to learn all I can about

Prince Gladen, and I am confident when I say you have a good heart. Let this be a symbol of your

worth, of who you truly are, regardless of your mistakes."

I had no name for the emotion lighting his eyes as he stared up at me, almost in wonder, before he

slowly reached out, his fingers grazing mine as he accepted the rose. "Such sound council. Wherever

did you hear it?"

"From a man who's rather wise and will make a wonderful king someday," I said.

"And it was beautifully returned by a woman who I suspect is very wise herself…even if she was

foolish enough to pluck a royal rose without the prince's permission." His expression was too teasing

for me to believe he was truly upset.

"Perhaps, but I'm on good terms with the future king and thus can get away with anything."

To my relief he laughed, a gesture which lit up his entire face. I tilted my head to study him.

Despite the curse disfiguring his features, I didn't find him ugly. In fact, he was rather cute. Whether I

was learning to see past his curse or it was fading as his own heart slowly healed, I wasn't sure.

His good humor faded when he noticed my staring. He shifted nervously. "Are you…truly not

repulsed?"

"No," I said honestly. "I really am not."

He blinked, seeming surprised…and rather awed. "No one has ever seen past my looks before,

either as a handsome prince or as a beast."

And I felt I truly could. The curse hadn't lessened the light in his eyes, dampened his charm, or

taken away his rather endearing boyish enthusiasm. Even though he was only a shadow of his former

appearance, he was still rather…cute. But there was something deeper, something I wanted nothing

more than to discover, to truly see who he really was.

If only he could see *me* in return, not as the enchantress who'd cursed him, but as one who'd give

anything to take back that mistake and was striving to become better. But he likely would never be

able to see that person, a thought which made me profoundly sad. I tried to push the emotion away,

wanting nothing to ruin this moment between us.

Yet the moment was already ruined, for I now realized that I was playing a very dangerous game.

If I wanted to keep my heart intact, then I couldn't involve myself even further with the prince. Yet

would I be strong enough to stop our deepening relationship?

His grin returned, causing my heart to lift. It was strange how quickly I'd grown attached to his

smile. I forced myself to banish that foolish thought; I was growing as ridiculous as dear Rosemarie.

Thinking of her only escalated my guilt for interacting with the man I knew held her interest.

"You're a good person," I repeated, wanting to assure him while I still could. "I know that's true,

Your Highness, so please never believe otherwise."

I shifted, making to stand and leave, but froze at his next words. "Actually, it's…Gladen."

My breath hooked. I slowly turned back around to face him. "Gladen?" A girlish thrill rippled

over me just from saying it.

His cheeks pinked. "Yes, that's my name: Prince Gladen. I mean, not *Prince* Gladen. Just Gladen

will do. I mean, I don't want you to call me *prince* anymore. Titles are so unnecessary…" He sighed.

"Blast, I'm certainly making a muddle of this. Perhaps bravery isn't a princely quality that comes

naturally to me. I'm even experiencing a brief moment of insanity thinking that arranged marriages are

far easier than *this*…but I suppose they're also far less rewarding." He rumpled his hair with a

nervous laugh.

"What do arranged marriages have to do with anything?" I stuttered.

"Nothing," he said hastily before taking another wavering breath. "But back to the matter at hand:

I'd appreciate it if from now on we could drop all formalities between us. After all, we're friends…

right?"

He held his breath, as if fearing my answer. The ache in my heart grew. Resorting to such a

familiar address with my prince…I'd become much more entangled than I'd initially thought, which

would inevitably make it all the more difficult to break away.

But for the moment I had him, and I'd cherish whatever was developing between us for as long as

I could. "We *are* friends," I whispered. Somehow, despite everything, it was true.

He beamed. "Then I shall call you Dahlia."

Hearing him use my name so familiarly should have been a special moment, yet it felt almost

tainted considering his dear voice spoke a name that wasn't mine. I so wanted to tell him my real

name so I could hear him speak it…but it was an impossible wish.

“That would be lovely,” I managed.

His smile grew. “Thank you.” He took my hand and held it between his. Despite the warts, all I

could focus on was how warm and soft his skin felt against mine. “I’m afraid I have a meeting and

must take my leave. But I hope…we can meet again soon, on purpose now rather than relying on

chance.”

It was almost frightening how desperately I wanted to see him again. I was too breathless to

respond, so, heart pounding, I could only nod.

He pressed a light kiss on my hand. “Then I shall be in the gardens tomorrow afternoon, just after

tea. I’m looking forward to it.”

“So am I.” It was surprising how much.

I watched as he stood and left the garden, thrilling when he paused at the gate to steal a rather shy

yet endearing look back, leaving me feeling strangely fluttery, a feeling deep down I knew I *shouldn’t*

be experiencing, yet which I felt all the same.

It doesn’t mean anything, I tried to rationalize. The only reason I wanted to see him again was to

break the curse and alleviate my guilt. *We’re simply friends.*

I repeatedly tried to reassure myself of this, but as I stared after him long after he’d departed the

garden, the new emotions invading my heart told a different story, one I was almost afraid to continue.

Yet though I was uncertain about where this journey would lead, I couldn’t deny I was desperate to

find out.

C H A P T E R 9

During the next two weeks, I met with Prince Gladen nearly every day. We spent hours deep

in conversation as we strolled the forest and gardens, or read together in the library,

sharing the wonder that came from the written word.

The more our friendship deepened, the more light began to fill my life, until all the darkness I had

been harboring at last dissipated. With my newfound contentment much of the curse faded away, a

little bit more each day. Yet it didn’t vanish completely, not with my continuous deceit in keeping my

true identity a secret from Gladen and the betrayal each meeting with him was to my sister.

While I hoped she’d found a new man to fancy, her lack of mentioning anything of the sort made

me fear that my earlier suspicions of her shifting feelings hadn’t amounted to anything, leaving her

heart more susceptible to heartache should she discover my secret relationship with the prince.

And she had every reason to maintain her interest. Gladen's curse was also gradually

disappearing and his handsomeness slowly returning, but although with it came the renewed attention

of the court, his own towards me never diminished…a thought I welcomed even as it increased my

unease concerning the nature of our relationship.

It was only friendship, I constantly reminded myself, but this was becoming more and more

difficult for me to believe with every interaction with the prince.

With each passing moment I felt our connection deepen, more powerful than any spell; I dreaded

the day when that spell would inevitably break…for surely this couldn't last forever, as much as I

wanted it to. But until that moment came, I'd bask in this new wondrous magic while it lasted.

Though my time with the prince caused light to chase away the shadows that had previously

shrouded my heart, I hadn't tried to access my magic for anything other than my disguise, too afraid

my powers would remain elusive; if they didn't return with the light, then I feared they were gone

forever.

So I found other ways to assist Enchantress Ivy. I spent my days foraging for ingredients and

preparing them, delivering remedies to the villagers, tidying and relabeling the shelves of potions,

and spending extra hours immersed in my studies so I wouldn't fall behind when, as Ivy believed, I

would eventually resume my apprenticeship. She had more faith in me than I had in myself, for I was

still at a loss as to how to dispel the curse completely.

The question repeatedly sent me to Ivy's library. There the hours melted away as I studied books

on magical laws and properties as well as accounts of cursed individuals who were eventually cured,

but despite my best efforts I never found anything specific to my current dilemma.

It only deepened my despair…as well as my guilt for the continued deception. Though my time

with Gladen brought me fierce joy, it was tainted by the knowledge that it was all a lie; the friendship

we'd forged wouldn't exist if he knew who I truly was. The disguise was a barrier between us, and it

would remain so as long as I kept my true identity hidden and left what had happened between us

unresolved, a path I feared to walk for the inevitable destination it would lead to.

But I knew taking it was the right choice, and I was tired of continuously making wrong ones. I

couldn’t bear to live this way any longer. Which was how I found myself standing in my bedroom

facing the mirror.

Though my magical disguise didn’t deceive my own eyes, my well-trained observation could

detect faint glimmers of light surrounding me, signs of the illusion created for Prince Gladen. I lifted

my hand and with a wavering breath reached inside myself for the spell that would remove it, the first

enchantment I’d dared perform since sensing light reentering my magic.

At first nothing happened. My panic rose and I searched harder within myself, feeling as if I were

peeling back several layers that served as an obstacle between me and my magic. Eventually I sensed

a glimmer of power and struggled to pull it over myself, allowing it to take away the disguise until

it’d faded completely. It was the first time in weeks I’d been free of it… leaving me feeling exposed,

as if my secrets were no longer protected and would thus stop at nothing to condemn me.

With a steadying breath I left my room to head for the palace, pausing in the magic room to seek

Enchantress Ivy’s permission to leave. Her eyebrows rose as she surveyed me, her well-trained eye

immediately noticing the absence of my magical disguise. “Are you going to speak with His

Highness?”

The very thought caused my chest to constrict, but I forced a nod. “I’m going to try. He deserves

an explanation and an apology.”

She nodded her approval. “I’m relieved to hear that. You’ve come a long way, Astrid.”

I had my budding friendship with Gladen to thank for that. “How could I have been so blind

before as to who the prince truly was?”

Ivy rested a gentle had on my arm. “Hardened hearts prevent us from seeing what’s truly in front

of us. Don’t condemn yourself for your past mistakes, but instead focus on all the ways you grew from

them. You are not who you once were.”

I wasn’t, both in good ways and ones I regretted. For after it had removed my spell, my magic had

retreated back to where it’d been hiding; something that had once been so close to the surface now

felt buried deep, and at this point it felt impossible to ever fully recover it, even with an apology.

Did I even deserve for my magic to return?

MY HEART POUNDED with every step as my weak tracking spell guided me by its faded, flickering light

through the palace corridors, much as it had the first day I'd spoken to the prince after the curse, but

this time I was seeking him out for an entirely different purpose—not to try and expose his faults for

him to see, but to expose my own.

As before, the tracking spell led me to the library, the very scene of my first interaction with

Gladen after the curse. The location didn't surprise me—the library was his favorite place when duty

didn't require him to attend meetings and other court functions.

My heartbeat escalated as I stared at the towering oak double doors, trying to summon the courage

to open them. We'd created some wonderful memories within the room's walls, and I feared I was

about to taint them forever. But if I had any hope of one day being able to finally share that Lady

Dahlia and Enchantress Astrid were one and the same, then this was the first step. Only knowing how

much I cherished our friendship and that he deserved an apology, no matter how difficult it would be

to extend, gave me the courage to finally enter.

I found Gladen in his usual window seat overlooking the rose garden that had also become very

dear to me for all the time we'd spent there together. At the sound of my approaching footsteps he

eagerly looked up, as if he recognized the sound of Lady Dahlia's walk… only to find me instead.

Confusion puckered his brow, quickly followed by wariness.

He snapped his book shut and shoved it out of view to prevent my seeing the title, so unlike his

willingness to share his latest reads with Lady Dahlia. He stood with clear reluctance. "Enchantress

Astrid." His bow was stiff.

My mouth was so dry that it took me a moment to answer. "Gladen—I mean, Your Highness." I

dipped into a shaky curtsy.

His eyebrows rose at my familiar address and his stern expression only deepened.

I shifted on my feet as I nervously awaited his reaction to seeing me for the first time since our

confrontation at Enchantress Ivy's cottage, and while he didn't look nearly as angry, he was clearly

not pleased to see me. Despite knowing the reason, I was so used to his easy smiles towards me as

Lady Dahlia that my heart ached, a pain more acute than I'd anticipated.

He clenched his jaw, as if trying to suppress words he knew he shouldn't speak to the one who'd

cursed him once before. "What brings you to the library, Enchantress? Forgive me if I hope it has

nothing to do with me…or perhaps it does, considering the circumstance I now find myself in?"

I frowned. "And what circumstance is that?" My gaze drifted to his face. While several warts still

remained, his features were no longer distorted, which meant he was finally receiving what he'd so

earnestly pleaded me for the last time we'd spoken as Astrid and Gladen: the curse was breaking.

His look was baffled, as if he thought the answer should be obvious. "*This*." He motioned to his

face. "Surely I look different than the last time you saw me." He rose his brows in challenge.

I hungrily took in his features, which had become so familiar and dear to me, no matter which

state of the curse they were in. "Your curse is fading."

"Your doing, I presume?" He became suspicious. "You told me you're the only one who can break

it, but that was the last thing I expected when you're the one who cast it in the first place. Is this some

sort of trick, a cruel way to give me false hope?"

I mutely shook my head.

His brow puckered at my admission, but it did nothing to soften his features or dispel the

wariness lining his eyes. "Then perhaps you're here for another reason." I started to shake my head

again, but he ignored the denial and pushed forward. “Are you going to recast the curse…or perhaps

cast a new one entirely? Am I to be a frog after all?”

“No, I—” I struggled to speak, but it was becoming increasingly difficult with the painful

direction this conversation was quickly taking.

“Because you couldn’t be here for any other reason,” he continued. “Why else would you seek me

out other than to punish me for a reason I still don’t understand?”

His voice was rising along with his temper. As he spoke, fresh warts appeared along his cheek, a

manifestation of the bitterness filling his heart towards me. I watched helplessly, wishing there were a

way I could prevent them, but this aspect of the curse lay beyond my control.

His eyes widened as he felt the warts materialize. His fingers went to his face, poking and

prodding at the newly formed blemishes. His glare snapped to me. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing.” It was only partially true, for while my magic wasn’t causing the warts to appear, I

knew my unwanted presence was. This wasn’t what I’d wanted when I’d set out to apologize. Would

he even listen to it should I manage to find both the words and the courage to speak them?

His glare sharpened. “You must be to blame; the curse hasn’t worsened until now. What other

explanation could there be than that it’s all your doing?”

My heart gave a painful tug at his escalating frustration. Seeing his despair was far worse than my

own when I’d first discovered the curse had backfired. “Due to the nature of the curse I cast, your

anger is what’s fueling the curse’s power, and it is now beyond my control. I’d give anything to take it

back. I can’t tell you how much I regret—if only I could—”

His snort cut off my fumbled attempts. “You can’t sincerely be sorry. Else you’d have broken the

curse long before now.”

“I’m trying—”

But he no longer seemed to be listening. Instead he watched me through narrowed, suspicious

eyes before quite suddenly he turned away and ran a hand through his hair as the fight left him. “I

promised myself after our last interaction I wouldn’t allow my anger to make me treat you with such

disrespect…a promise I’m clearly breaking.”

“I hold no blame against you,” I said. “Your anger is understandable.”

“Even so, it’s no excuse for my current behavior.” He released a heavy sigh. “Yet despite my best

intentions, I find it difficult to treat you with anything less than suspicion. I admittedly have very little

reason to trust you. Though my accusations are likely premature, I can think of no other reason for you

to seek me out than for… *this*."

He motioned to the warts lining his cheek. I tried to look at them, but all I saw was Gladen—a

man I'd come to know and care for deeply.

"I came to…" Once more I tried to form the apology I knew I needed to give, but again it didn't

come.

My shoulders ached from the tension in my rigid posture, weary from both the confrontation and

the burden of my deceit, a constant, unrelenting weight I couldn't escape. I took in the distrust filling

Gladen's expression, his anger, and his sadness. What good were remorseful words when my actions

had yet to succeed in *showing* him how truly sorry I was? Could I truly seek repentance when my

mistakes lingered to haunt me? Until the curse was broken, I didn't deserve his forgiveness.

I sighed and turned to leave. He let me go without argument, seeming relieved he'd escaped the

confrontation with nothing more than a few extra warts.

I paused at the end of the row to glance back at him. He watched me leave with a great deal of

apprehension, but while his expression remained hard, another emotion filled his eyes, different from

the tension from our interaction. Something was distressing him, and whatever it was, my presence

had undoubtedly made everything worse. I wanted to leave him better than I'd found him, not add to

his burdens.

"Is something troubling you, Gladen?" The words escaped before I could register them, and too

late I realized that not only was the inquiry too personal for Astrid and Gladen's relationship, but I'd

used his familiar name. "Your Highness," I hastily corrected.

He tilted his head to study me with a look so intense it was as if he sensed the layers of secrets

still between us and was trying to uncover them. My heart pounded wildly with his perusal. Surely he

wouldn't suspect the true reason for my slip-up…would he?

It felt like ages before he finally spoke. "My worries are none of your concern; I'd never share

any part of myself with *you*."

Even though the sentiment was well deserved, it still caused me to wince. I nodded and left him,

but I didn’t leave the library. Desperation cinched my chest, urging me to still try to find a way to

make amends. I hid myself behind several shelves and attempted to access my magic.

My powers were more reluctant to be of use after having so recently aided me, and even once I’d

managed to grasp them, my rising helplessness made them slippery and difficult to control. My fingers

managed to hook around a faint pinprick of magic…only for it to once again slip away.

Come on, I silently coaxed it. *I need you, as does Gladen. Please.*

As if my magic was also growing to care for him, at this earnest plea it granted me a portion of its

powers, just enough to recast my disguise spell. The moment I was assured it fully covered me I

hurried back to the window seat where I’d left Gladen, hoping he was still there.

I startled to a stop when I came upon him sitting with his shoulders slumped and his forehead

burrowed in his hands. I stepped forward hesitantly, unsure whether it was truly wise to disturb him

while he was in such a state.

“Prince Gladen?” I asked hesitantly.

At the sound of my voice his gaze snapped up. At first he seemed startled to see me, but then a

grin lit his face, dispelling much of his previous melancholy. “Dahlia, I was hoping I’d see you

today.” His brow furrowed. “Why did you refer to me as *Prince* Gladen? It’s been weeks since

we’ve had such formality between us.”

The slip-up was natural considering that moments before formality had been yet another barrier

between us, but I couldn’t confess such a thing. “I’m sorry.” The apology was for far more, a belated

form of what I should have given him before. If only he knew.

“It’s no matter.” He started towards me, only to pause several feet away. His grin faltered as he

took in my expression. Then he was in front of me, his eyes wide with worry. “Are you alright,

Dahlia?” Whatever his own troubles were seemed to matter little to him now, his sole focus on me. It

only made my heart ache further.

I nodded, but he wasn’t fooled by my lie. His concern deepened. He hesitated a moment before

reaching out to rest his hands on my shoulders, a comforting touch that was warm and inviting, giving

me the strange desire to lean in and let me hold me.

“It’s complicated,” I managed. “But what of you? You look to be in far greater distress than I am.”

He looked as if he wanted to protest my deferring his inquiry before his weariness fully overcame

him, unable to be kept back any longer. “It’s…been a rather trying day. With my curse lessening, I’m

expected to resume more of my original duties, not to mention much of the unwanted attention is

returning.”

“You mean…with the women of the court?” My heart jolted at this news, a reaction I had no

explanation for.

As if realizing his admission had bothered me, he soothingly rubbed my arms before he realized

what he was doing. A blush enfolded his cheeks and he hastily yanked his hands away with an

awkward cough.

“The stares are already proving wearying. I did not miss their interest or insincere attention, nor

the pressure to resume playing the charade outlined for me, one I was quite happy to be free of. I feel

as if I’m being thrust back into the world of royal expectations and am overwhelmed by the

possibility.”

“And you’re unsure how to remain true to yourself?” I asked gently.

He managed a small smile. “You’ve always understood me, Dahlia.”

“I’ve come to know you well these past several weeks.”

Softness settled over his expression at my mention of all the time we’d spent together. “I’ve

enjoyed our time together immensely. I regret our meetings will become more limited considering all

the upcoming changes…now that things are improving.”

A frown tugged on his lips as his touch went to the warts which had appeared during his

confrontation with me as the enchantress. I feared he’d bring them up, a conversation I couldn’t bear

to have at this moment, so I hastily diverted the subject.

“How are things with your parents?”

He sighed as his hand lowered. “Not well, I’m afraid. I fear I’m reverting to my old habits by

allowing them to mold my life as they see fit, as if the strength I’ve gained during my curse never

happened.”

“I’m sure it’s still a part of you,” I said assuredly. “You were brave enough to hold your head high

during your curse despite the dark whispers surrounding you, and you were strong enough to begin

walking the path of being true to yourself. Thus I know you possess the strength to stand up to your

parents.”

Hope brightened his eyes. “You really think so?”

I nodded. “Don’t let yourself go so easily now that you’ve discovered yourself. You’re worth

fighting for.”

Tenderness filled his look. “I’m glad you encountered me in the library.”

My heart both lifted at his words and twinged with guilt that the first time I’d encountered him

today hadn’t been nearly as pleasant. “Did you take refuge here? Perhaps from the fawning women of

the court, your parents, or even…me?” It was an effort to keep my smile mischievous.

He returned it. “Never from you. And though I cherish this room, it’s admittedly not a very good

hiding place.” His brow furrowed as he glanced towards where I as Enchantress Astrid had left

moments before.

“What is it?” I asked, despite knowing exactly what was troubling him and being afraid to hear

him speak of it.

He sighed. “I broke my promise again. After my last interaction with Enchantress Astrid, I was

determined to behave better should I see her again. But when the moment came…I just couldn’t.”

“I’m sure you did your best.” The last thing I wanted was for him to feel additional distress on my

account; I'd already caused him enough pain.

He shook his head. "Once again I treated her harshly. Despite my resolve to be better, the moment

I saw her…I was admittedly frightened. I was convinced she was going to turn me into a toad, and

that would have ruined everything."

He gave a hollow laugh, even as my heart lurched yet again. So he wasn't just angry towards me,

but *afraid*. It was yet another obstacle that would make it even more difficult for me to eventually

confess the truth.

"Don't be so hard on yourself," I said gently. "Change doesn't happen overnight. What's important

is that you desire to improve and continuously work towards it."

The truth of my own words settled over me, urging me to extend such grace towards myself, but it

was so much harder to give it the more I regretted my actions and came to care for Gladen.

A new emotion filled his eyes, one that was far deeper than the friendship we'd been nourishing

drop by drop. "You've been such a support to me, Dahlia. I can't tell you what it means to me, how

much you've helped me."

He reached out as if to take my hand, and with the gesture I suddenly recognized that unnamed

emotion hidden in his expression, one that revealed that what we had between us had moved beyond

friendship to something *more* without my even realizing it.

For a moment I almost allowed him to take my hand, aching to know what his skin felt like against

mine and wanting nothing more than to explore the sensations I finally realized were enfolding my

heart. But at the last moment I pulled my hand back, tucking it securely behind me and scooting

several inches away to create much-needed space between us. But it didn't remain there long before I

moved my hand back, as if part of me invited him to touch me.

His gaze flickered down to my hand with a look of longing but he made no motion to take it, much

to my fierce relief…and admittedly disappointment, an emotion which only deepened my confusion.

Why did I want to hold Gladen's hand? We were only friends.

Only this time, when I thought the familiar words, I recognized them for the lie that they were—

one I'd told myself for weeks in an attempt to assuage my guilt for how far I'd allowed this to go. But

I couldn't deny the truth any longer: something was changing between us, a shift occurring within my

heart that wasn't only friendship, but something deeper and far more precious.

And now that the process had begun I feared there'd be no way to stop it. But I could try. I *needed*

to. For this wasn't just about my feelings.

It was also about Rosemarie.

Guilt pierced the warmth from my blossoming feelings for Gladen, souring them until I felt I'd be

sick. What had I done?

C H A P T E R 1 0

I n the following days, I desperately tried to keep my distance from the prince. At first it

was easy to avoid him, for after the awkward way our interaction in the library had ended

when I'd rejected his reaching for my hand, he seemed to be avoiding me as well, as if

my denial had made him nervous.

But it was as if some unseen power was drawing us together, for despite both of our intentions,

we only managed to go a few days before encountering one another in the woods.

Gladen startled when he saw me, nearly dropping the small stack of books he carried. "Dahlia!"

Despite knowing I shouldn't be pleased to see him, my treacherous heart lifted all the same, and I

couldn't quite hold back my smile. "Hello, Gladen."

He didn’t respond, only stared at me before realizing what he was doing and lowering his gaze

with a blush. “It’s good to see you. It’s been a while. When you didn’t seek me out, I feared…” He

shifted nervously and didn’t answer.

Oh, so perhaps he hadn’t been avoiding me after all. “I’ve been busy. I’d assumed…you were

busy as well.”

“Never too busy for you.” His eyes widened at his words, as if only just realizing how they came

across. “I mean…I always enjoy our time together. We’ve become good…friends.” He cleared his

throat and hastily looked away.

Awkwardness hung between us, an emotion I ached to dispel. I nodded towards his books. “What

are you currently reading?”

It was the correct choice of topic. Gladen’s uneasiness vanished, replaced by his usual boyish

eagerness as he showed me each book in his teetering stack and recounted the ones he’d read since

our last meeting.

Soon the lingering tension dispelled completely and his manner shifted to the usual friendliness

I’d come to expect from him. His expression and actions were so open and sincere it made me

wonder whether I'd misread our parting interaction in the library…and if I was misreading the tender

looks, soft smiles, and almost flirtatious comments he made now.

I was imagining things. If I but convinced myself of that, then there'd be no harm in continuing to

meet with him. I'd missed these conversations, the warm joy he made me feel, and especially *him*—

his company, the way his eyes lit up as he smiled, everything. As wrong as I feared this was, I didn't

want to lose him.

Following our chance encounter in the forest, the feat of attempting to stay away from Gladen

became impossible; not only did Gladen repeatedly find any excuse for my company in the usual

areas we spent time together, but my heart urged me to seek him out in return, desperate to fill the

void he left whenever we weren't together. To make matters worse, I found myself unconsciously

flirting with him as I tentatively explored the feelings within my heart I knew I shouldn't be

experiencing, but which I felt anyway.

Time soon lost all meaning, as if a spell had been cast over us. I never would have imagined that

moments themselves could be magical—a part of the most beautiful and rare of enchantments, filled

with joy and beauty. If only there were a spell to bottle these precious moments up in order to keep

them forever. How could I possibly stay away from this new and beautiful type of magic?

I was a terrible sister.

No, you're not, I tried to reassure myself. *For this will go nowhere. You can't let it.*

There likely was nothing to even be concerned over, I rationalized. My sister had gotten over

Gladen's rejection easily enough, so perhaps what she'd felt towards him hadn't been love, but

merely fond memories of their childhood friendship, one my own friendship with the prince did

nothing to jeopardize. Even if her feelings *had* been something more, in truth they weren't even suited

for one another, not like *we* were.

Besides, Rosemarie was a sweet, understanding soul. Surely she'd be happy this… *friendship*

brought me such joy…wouldn't she? I took a steadying breath to quench the guilt once more prickling

my heart. Of course she would.

I clung to this belief as I found myself once more on the way to the gardens to meet with Gladen,

swinging a basket of pastries Rosemarie and I had baked this morning while I carried the book

Gladen and I had been reading together tucked beneath my arm, one I hoped to continue should we

accidentally meet up again today.

The early summer day was bright with promise. I hummed cheerfully as I walked through the

royal grounds to the rose garden, which had become one of many special places I shared with Gladen,

tucked away between the palace and the enchantress cottage, a place between both of our worlds that

was just ours. The beauty of the garden only added to my joy as roses of all colors and varieties

bloomed around me, their own type of magic.

I slowed when my gaze settled on a bed of mayflowers growing in a clump alongside the path,

similar to the ones I'd attempted to practice my transformation spell on in the woods a month before.

My fingers tingled at the memory, as if my powers were stirring to life once more and aching to be

unleashed. Perhaps it was time to try and rekindle its flame.

I reached inside myself, searching, and though the route to my powers was overgrown from

disuse, I accessed my magic almost effortlessly, just as I'd done before the curse had weakened it. I

whispered the familiar spell, waved my hand, and watched as my powers floated towards the flower,

enfolding it in soft, shimmery light. The flower immediately transformed into a white butterfly.

Regaining my magic was like reuniting with an old friend. Warmth expanded in my chest as I watched

the butterfly flutter away.

The joy brought by my magic's return and the anticipation of a morning with Gladen occupied my

thoughts so thoroughly that it took me a moment to notice he wasn't alone when I came upon him in the

rose garden—a noblewoman whose name I didn't know sat close beside him where he was

attempting to read on our usual bench.

I immediately stilled, watching in horror at the noblewoman's coy smiles and the flirtatious way

she batted her eyes. A hot feeling seared through me, sharp as poison, especially when I witnessed the

way she leaned closer, practically touching him. Whatever her interest, it certainly had nothing to do

with the dear man himself, just his position as the prince. While I too appreciated his looks, the more

our relationship had deepened, the easier it'd become to see past his outward appearance—whether

cursed or not—to the man inside.

"What are you reading, Your Highness?" Her tone was sickeningly sweet, as was the disgusting

way she scooted herself closer to him.

He stiffened and leaned away but otherwise gave no reaction. She gave an exaggerated pout.

“Your book must be thoroughly engrossing, but as interesting as I’m sure it is, certainly there are

more *interesting* things to occupy your attention.” She ran a finger down his arm.

He flinched and snapped to his feet, his glare sharp. “The fact that I find my book far more

engrossing than you is an invitation for you to depart, not to continue to bother me with your unwanted

attention.” He made an attempt to keep his voice even, but frustration seeped through. “Now be so

kind as to leave me in peace.”

She gaped at him before lifting her nose in the air, her expression sour. “As you wish, Your

Highness.” Her departing curtsy was rigid, but he didn’t seem to notice or care; he’d already sat back

down and resumed reading, paying her no mind as she stomped from the garden.

I watched her leave, the scene so familiar, much like when Gladen had rejected my sister. And

though I recognized his behavior for what it truly was—not the cruelty of a conceited prince, but a

man with no patience for shallow relationships that could never be genuine—it still saddened me to

see it. Prince Gladen was a better man than his impatience often caused him to be.

Gladen heard my footsteps as I slowly ventured towards our bench and he looked up with a wide

grin. “There you are. I’ve been hoping to see you.” He beckoned me closer, but I didn’t move, the

interaction I’d just witnessed making me hesitant.

“If now is a bad time…I see you’re occupied. I can come back later…”

“Don’t be ridiculous. The book was just a futile attempt to distract myself while waiting for you.

Not even the most engrossing story holds a candle to your company, Dahlia.” He set his book down

and patted the spot beside him again, his expression imploring and completely irresistible.

Appeased, I grinned girlishly as I joined him, relishing the warmth of our close proximity. But my

smile quickly faded as I glanced towards the garden exit where the noblewoman had left in a huff. “I

see I’m not the only woman you’ve had the pleasure of interacting with this morning.”

He groaned. “You saw that? Then I’m afraid you also saw me at my worst.”

I gave him a look that I hoped was both understanding and disapproving. “I know their attention is

hard for you, but perhaps you can let them down in a way that’s more true to yourself.”

He pondered my words for a moment before he sighed. “You’re right, I behaved badly. I find

myself patient in most areas except for fawning ladies. I miss the reprieve the curse granted me from

their annoying attention, and now that I must endure it once more, I find my patience wearing quite

thin. But that’s no excuse; I must work on being better in the future.”

I smiled at his willingness before my expression became teasing, a way to soften the scolding I’d

just given. “Do *all* fawning ladies bother you?” I raised my eyebrows in mock offense.

He chuckled. “Indeed, all of them…with one exception.”

While his innocent flirting was familiar, something deeper lit his eyes as he looked at me now. It

only intensified as he reached out and curled a loose strand of my golden hair around his finger, his

movements almost hypnotic. My breath caught at the feelings the gesture ignited inside me. As close

as we’d become, save for occasional brief accidental brushes against my hand he hadn’t attempted to

touch me again since that day in the library, and I found I enjoyed it far more than I ought.

Gladen shifted on the bench, angling his body more towards mine, his expression almost shy.

“Dahlia? There’s something I want to discuss with you.”

Hope lifted my heart, even as fear tried to pull it back down. “What is it?” I shakily managed.

He took a wavering breath. “I—” His words ended abruptly.

I grazed his arm. “You can always confide in me, Gladen.” We’d already shared several secrets in

our many conversations together, so many that the only one that remained unspoken concerned my

powers and my true identity, the very one he could never find out, for it would cause him to push me

away forever.

He didn’t answer immediately, his gaze fixated on my fingers, which I now realized were stroking

his arm. I’d spent so much time wanting to touch him, and even though his sleeve was a barrier

between my fingers and his skin, I could feel his taut muscles beneath the fabric, ones I ached to

further explore.

“You’re touching me,” he stated.

I immediately froze. What was I doing? Hadn’t I just witnessed that sniveling noblewoman try to

touch him in such an intimate way moments before and him being thoroughly disgusted by her flirting?

“I’m sorry.” I silently ordered myself to pull away, but I found I couldn’t move. Nor did he.

Instead he rested his hand over mine, keeping my fingers securely in place, his permission.

He slowly lifted his gaze to meet my own. “It’s alright, Dahlia. I—can’t tell you how long I’ve

wanted to feel your touch.”

As he spoke, his own fingers stroked the back of my hand, his touch far more pleasant than

anything I’d experienced before, even more than the feeling of magic beneath my skin. My powers

tingled with each caress, and I was certain that with his single touch I could perform even the most

complicated of spells.

He slowed and bit his lip. “Part of me can’t believe this is real. You never touched me…before.”

I understood his unspoken implication, recognized the insecurity and fear tainting his voice, the

part of him that still doubted anyone could value him for who he truly was.

“Just because I resisted doesn’t mean I didn’t want to,” I said. “Even with as close as we’ve

become, you’re still the crown prince.”

“Not with you,” he said. “*Never* with you. I’m sorry for being afraid. I’ve spent my entire life

wanting to be seen, but never as much as I’ve wanted to be seen by *you*.”

“You are,” I said. “Please don’t doubt.”

He gave a shaky laugh. “Fear can be rather powerful, even for a prince who’s supposed to be

brave. It’s why I’ve held myself back for so long, something that’s becoming increasingly impossible

the longer I’m around you.”

How could he not see that he was already brave? Before the curse had started to fade, he’d

bravely walked the corridors of his palace despite the whispers and disgusted looks from the court.

He’d learned to speak up to the overbearing king, and remained true to himself even after he’d

regained the attention of the court.

Yet fear filled him now. “There’s nothing to be afraid of,” I assured him. “I know you, Gladen.

You’re brave enough to take a leap of faith.”

He swallowed and nodded, and with a steadying breath he returned his touch to my hand, grazing

my skin with his fingers, but before I could fully enjoy the sensations such an innocent gesture created,

he hastily withdrew. “Was that alright?”

I scooted my hand closer, an invitation for him to touch me again. His smile was a bit shy as his

fingertips returned to their former position, his thumb rubbing circles along my hand, his look

concentrated, as if he was trying to read the secrets hidden beneath my skin.

I'd imagined this moment dozens of times, and now that I was experiencing it…it was far more

magical than I could have ever dreamed. And it only grew more so. My own hand dropped from his

arm as he reached out to cradle my cheek, his thumb moving to caress my jawline in a thoroughly

distracting way. His gaze seeped into mine, filled with so much emotion and many secrets, ones I

longed to spend the rest of my life discovering.

"Dahlia," he breathed as his touch moved to weave through my hair. "Whenever I'm around you…

I've never felt this way before. My feelings came so quickly that at first I feared they were simply

because you're the first woman I've ever come to truly know and who, in return, has come to truly

know me. But I've been surrounded by the court long enough to quickly learn how special you are. It

didn't take me long to realize that what I truly feel about you is genuine."

What he truly feels…? As much as I welcomed his words, they caused my panic to rise, a

reminder I didn't deserve for him to feel such sweet sentiments towards me. Yet I wanted them all the

same.

“What you feel?” I managed breathlessly.

He trailed his hand down my arm to lace our fingers together. My hand instinctively tightened

around his, which earned me a smile.

“Political obligations have been a part of my life for so long that I never imagined I could find

true happiness…until I met you. And now that I’ve found you…I never want to let you go.”

His free hand curled around my cheek and he leaned closer, causing my already frantically

pounding heart to nearly burst from my chest. Was he going to…kiss me?

I leaned closer, desperate to bridge the distance between us. Imagining what it’d be like to touch

him had been nothing to my precious daydreams about what it’d be like to *kiss* him. Despite how

close we’d become I wanted to be closer still, to feel his lips on mine and to be enfolded in his arms,

my own personal castle.

We were inches away, close enough I could feel his warm breath caress my lips. Gladen’s fingers

grazed my wrist, brushing over a wart that had suddenly appeared, whether as a lingering sign of the

guilt that hadn’t fully faded from my heart or as a manifestation of the fear crowding out the beauty of

this moment, I wasn’t sure.

With my magic strong once again, I didn’t fear he could feel through my concealment spell. But his

touch brought to the forefront of my mind all the things I’d tried hardest to forget: the curse I’d cast,

one that would forever keep us apart should he ever find out; the disguise I hid behind now,

concealing the true me from him; as well as all that had brought me to this point, for it’d all started

because my sister was in love with the prince, a man I now knew I would never deserve. If I allowed

myself to continue down this path, I’d not only betray my sister, but trick the prince into caring for a

woman who didn’t truly exist.

I yanked away with a gasp, severing our touch. “Please, don’t.”

He blinked at me, looking both embarrassed and…rather hurt. It took him a moment to find his

voice. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—it was inappropriate for me to try to —I simply got caught up in

the moment, and assumed that you…shared my feelings.”

His words breathed life into the emotions that had been blooming in my heart with each passing

day: *love*. My heart was no longer in my possession and hadn’t been for quite some time. The

realization left me breathless.

I’d felt the process occurring, yet I hadn’t allowed myself to admit my feelings, too afraid of what

it’d mean that I’d fallen in love with the prince. For deep down I’d always known that I couldn’t have

him after what I’d done, which meant realizing how deeply I’d grown to care for him would only

make it far more impossible to let him go.

But let him go I must. Yet with the way his expression crumpled at my rejection, I wasn’t sure I

was strong enough.

“That’s not why—” I began, but he spoke over me, his voice cracking with emotion.

“Of course you should pull away.” The pain in his eyes deepened and he seemed to struggle to

speak. “I—no one could ever—I was a fool to even think it was possible.”

Several warts appeared along his jawline, a sign of the curse’s return, as if it’d simply been

waiting patiently for Gladen’s previous fear, bitterness, and insecurity to return and grant it power,

emotions my callousness had caused.

“Of course they can,” I said. “I *do*. It’s just—” But I didn’t know how to explain without telling

him everything.

But he seemed not to hear me. “My worth seems to only come from my title, my appearance…yet

even they're not enough, not even for someone as special as you."

"That's not why I pulled away," I said desperately. "We can't do this, Gladen, but it has nothing to

do with you. I can't…you have no idea what I've done, why I could never have you." I struggled to

find a way to explain, yet even if I could have somehow found the words, he seemed too distraught to

hear them.

"I spent so much time searching for someone like you," he continued. "I'd hoped that you were

different."

"I *am.* Please, you must believe me."

But he clearly didn't. Instead, my words only seemed to deepen his despair, agony which broke

my heart. As I'd feared, my mistakes were only continuing to hurt him. I reached for him, desperate to

make amends, but before I could touch him he hastily stood.

"When I was first cursed I was afraid it'd keep me from ever finding love, but even with it getting

better I can't have you. At first I hoped I could, especially when you seemed to encourage my

affections…but I was clearly mistaken. I seem doomed to forever long for something I cannot have."

And without another word he stood and left.

I stared after him long after he’d departed, the garden’s roses blurring with my tears. I hadn’t

realized how strongly he’d react to my rejection, which meant that despite the passage of time, his

heart hadn’t healed as much as I’d thought. Even if I couldn’t have him myself, I’d never meant for

him to doubt his worth.

It was yet another stain on my conscience, and with it I feared I’d forever shattered all we’d built

between us. I felt as if something infinitely precious had been stolen from me. For what he didn’t

understand was that of the two of us, it was *I* who didn’t deserve *him*, as much as I now realized how

desperately I wanted him.

C H A P T E R 1 1

T he faint light of dawn tumbled through the window of the practice room whose alcove

I’d sat curled up in the entire night. The morning light glistened off the vase resting on

the sill, lighting up the two roses it contained in soft light—the blood-red cursed rose

and the violet one gifted to me by Gladen.

I’d used my limited magic to cast a spell on it so that it’d never wilt in hopes of preserving not

only his sweet gift, but all that it symbolized—acceptance of myself despite my mistakes, as well as

the feelings that had been blooming between us. But like all spells, this one would inevitably break.

I plucked the rose from the vase and held it close, right next to my heart. “Gladen,” I murmured. It

hurt to say his name, for with it came the reminder that I needed to let him go. For as much as I loved

him, true love was about sacrifice. He deserved a woman who not only saw him, but who hadn’t hurt

him the way I had. And though I wished for that woman to be me, I knew it couldn’t; my past would

forever stand as an impenetrable barrier between us.

I heard someone enter the room, and by the soft, pattering footsteps I knew it wasn’t Enchantress

Ivy. I glanced towards the doorway and found my sister standing there, watching me with deep

concern.

“Have you been here all night?”

I managed a nod. “How did you know where to find me?”

She glanced at my spellbook hovering over her shoulder and it hastily ducked out of sight. Her

lips twitched. “A lucky guess.” She approached to settle on the seat beside me. “Your book isn’t the

only one who’s worried. You haven’t been yourself for days. What’s troubling you, Astrid?”

Her entire expression radiated with love and sweetness. There was no one more deserving of a

man like Prince Gladen than my sister, especially considering their past friendship and how much she

already cared for him. Gladen deserved a good woman to love him. If I couldn’t give him that myself,

then my sister was the next best thing. As painful as it’d be to let him go, at least I could know that

doing so would add to my sister’s joy.

I wrapped my arm around her and drew her close. “Do you want to know a secret?”

She wasn’t so easily dissuaded. “Not until you tell me what’s bothering you; you can’t evade me

so easily.”

“Nothing is bothering me,” I lied. “I’ve just been lost in thought. You see, rumor has it that the

prince is finally ready to chose a new bride.”

Her eyebrows lifted at this bit of news, but her eyes didn’t light up like I’d expected. “I’m happy

for him. Does he have someone in mind?”

I gave her shoulders a squeeze. “Perhaps now that he’s free of any political obligation, you could

capture his interest?”

She frowned. “But he made it perfectly clear before that he wanted nothing to do with me;

whatever our past friendship, it is long gone.”

“It wasn’t *you*,” I assured her hastily. “He simply didn’t recognize you that day in the garden;

instead he thought you were another fawning woman who only cared for his title. Not to mention at the

time he was already promised to another; his actions were that of loyalty to his intended.”

I recognized the excuse the moment I spoke it—it had been the very one Rosemarie had given me

shortly after Gladen’s rejection of her, back when she was still brokenhearted and I was consumed

with anger. At the time I’d found it ridiculous, but now that I truly knew the prince…how could I have

once been so blind to his true motives?

Despite my explanation, Rosemarie’s wariness didn’t waver. “Perhaps he was right to be

concerned. I was like every other maiden, dazzled by his looks and his charm.”

“Of course you weren’t,” I said. “You two used to be friends—”

She gave me a look. “A friendship I had no interest in renewing until I saw what a fine man he’d

become.”

I ached to argue with her, but she was likely in earnest. “I have no doubt you would have seen

past his looks. Thus there’s no one more deserving of the prince’s love than you.” I’d only been lying

when I’d tried to convince myself that she and the prince weren’t suited, a way to justify my betrayal.

The thought only deepened my shame.

Her eyebrows rose as she finally understood my true meaning. “You want me to try and win

Prince Gladen’s heart?” Confusion puckered her brow at my nod. “But *why*? I thought you

disapproved of him?”

“I don’t,” I said. “At least, not anymore. I was wrong about him. He’s not conceited or unkind, but

instead so…” I paused at Rosemarie’s rather mischievous look. “It’s not what you think,” I amended

hastily, even as the guilt that I’d fallen in love with the man meant for my sister returned; as usual it

hadn’t strayed far.

“Yes, I’m certain it’s not.” But her smirk contradicted her words, causing my cheeks to burn.

“I’ve simply formed a friendship with the prince, considering we’ll one day to work closely with

one another.”

By her look, she didn’t accept this excuse either. “I know you mean well, but I don’t need to be

with the prince in order to be happy.”

“But you were so fond of him,” I pressed. “Don’t let the fact that his curse is still lingering be a

hinderance. I’m beginning to think there is only one thing that can break it forever.” From my years of

magical studies I’d learned there was no spell, charm, or potion more powerful than that of true love.

Since my other attempts to find a countercurse hadn’t worked, this was my last option.

She tilted her head. “If love is what is required, perhaps the caster of the curse should be the one

to break it, not me.” Her look became rather knowing.

The heat swarming my cheeks deepened. “How do you know I’m the one who cursed him?”

She rolled her eyes. “It wasn’t difficult to deduce. There are only two enchantresses in Rosileya,

and I certainly doubt Enchantress Ivy is responsible.” She lowered her gaze. “You did it because of

what happened between me and the prince, didn’t you?”

I rested my hand over hers. “You are not to blame. I admit that at first I *thought* you were my

reason, but I’m the one who chose to wrongfully channel my anger and walk the path that I did. You

have no responsibility for my mistakes."

"Yet you want my help fixing them all the same?"

"Please, Rosemarie." My voice caught. "I made a mistake and I've been trying to make it right…

but no matter how hard I try, he's still cursed, and I have no idea how to break it. I'm not sure what

else to try."

Compassion filled her eyes as she squeezed my hand. "I'm not sure what I can do, but you've

always been there for me, so I will do my best to help you."

I released a choked sob as she wrapped her arms around me. It was almost strange to be on the

receiving end of comfort from the sister I'd spent years protecting, but I melted into her loving

embrace all the same.

But while I welcomed it, it did little to quench my sadness at the thought of losing Gladen to her;

as much as I'd always wanted her happiness, my own heart still broke at the thought of all I'd be

giving up. I knew that this heartbreak would likely cause my own curse to remain permanent, but as

long as Rosemarie's love caused Gladen's to break, then I could be content.

ROSEMARIE QUIETLY WATCHED as I struggled to push the concealment spell over me. Due to my

sadness at the thought of losing Gladen, it took several attempts for me to perform the camouflage

charm that would render me essentially invisible, the perfect disguise for me to be able to watch the

interaction between the prince and my sister undetected.

When I finished, I turned towards her to find her searching the air around me. “Can you see me?” I

twirled in front of her, ensuring she saw every angle.

She pursed her lips as she studied the spot where I stood. “No, I can’t see you at all…oh wait,

there’s a bit here.” She motioned towards my hem.

I pushed the magic further, allowing it to encase the rest of me so that it covered the hem of my

gown. By the time I finished I felt exhausted, just as I always did whenever I performed any spell of

late.

Rosemarie smiled. “I can’t see you at all now. He’ll never know you’re in the garden with me.”

I still wasn’t sure why my sister insisted on my presence as she tried to woo Prince Gladen, and it

was only my fierce love for her that could compel me to offer such moral support by torturing my own

heart.

I followed her outside and across the sunlit royal grounds, where I suspected Gladen would be.

Sure enough, we found him in one of the gardens, and not just any of them, but the rose garden… *our*

rose garden.

He sat alone on our usual bench, a book open in his lap that he didn't appear to be reading.

Instead he stared wistfully into the distance, his shoulders slumped and devastation contorting his

expression. *I'd* done that to him, yet another offense against my conscience; the guilt was all

encompassing.

Rosemarie appeared thoughtful as she studied him. "He looks… brokenhearted."

"That's why he's in need of love," I said firmly.

She glanced sideways at the spot where I stood. "And you believe it must come from me?"

It *had* to. If anyone deserved a prince's love and could earn his in return, it would be Rosemarie

—the sweetest, most wonderful woman I knew. "There is no one more deserving of his affections

than you. Besides, I want you to be happy. Truly, Rosemarie, that's all I've ever wanted."

Her smile, while warm, was rather wistful. "And what of your own happiness?"

I lowered my gaze to the lawn. "I'm not sure there's any for me, so please at least let me be

assured you have it.”

She reached for my hand but grabbed my invisible elbow by mistake. She fumbled in the air until

she found my hand. “If this is what you need, then I’ll do all I can to help you.” Her promise was just

as firm as the first time she’d given it to me.

She squared her shoulders as she turned back to the garden entrance. Jealousy wrenched my heart

as I watched her make her way towards the prince, my Gladen. Despite not believing I deserved it,

was I strong enough to sacrifice the future I wanted with him, even for one so dear to me?

My nails dug deep into the hedgerow I huddled beside as I watched Rosemarie approach Gladen

with a dazzling smile and a deep curtsy. He seemed startled that his private moment had been

interrupted before recognition lit his eyes. He hastily stood to bow, his manner friendly whatever was

distressing him.

The two began conversing, Rosemarie with brightness and cheer, looking so adorable I fully

expected the prince to lose his heart to her from this single conversation alone. I studied his

expression hungrily, but while he was the epitome of politeness, his expression was absent its usual

boyish warmth; despite clearly being pleased to see his childhood friend, he still seemed stiff and

uncomfortable, so unlike the way he behaved with me.

I ached to know what they were discussing, but I was sure satisfying my curiosity wouldn't be

worth the torture it'd inflict on my heart as I heard my sister win *my* prince over. Even though I knew I

had to let him go, he still felt like mine; a part of me felt he always would.

After several minutes, Gladen's attention began to waver from their conversation as he cast his

gaze in the direction of where I was standing. I stiffened. Surely he couldn't see me…could he?

I hastily checked my spell to ensure it still masked me from view. It did, which made me wonder

if he could somehow sense me near, despite my magic. This and the different way he interacted with

my sister caused hope to penetrate my stubborn heart that his feelings for me couldn't be as easily

forgotten as I'd initially allowed myself to believe, and that perhaps we could somehow make things

work between us.

But as much as I yearned for this, the thought also terrified me, for my wishes did nothing to

dispel what I'd done to him, all of which seemed impossible to overcome.

In my distraction I didn’t notice that the spell masking me was beginning to fade. I scrambled to

cling to it, but my weak powers made it impossible for me to hold it for very much longer, especially

when I was also struggling to maintain the disguise I wore to keep Gladen from recognizing me as

Enchantress Astrid. The invisibility enchantment quickly trickled off me, so that the next time the

prince’s gaze drifted towards where I stood, he spotted me before I even had a chance to hide.

His entire manner immediately brightened. “Dahlia.” I saw his mouth form the surrogate name.

Rosemarie followed his line of sight and smiled at seeing me, not looking the least bit upset my

unreliable magic had interrupted their time together.

Gladen stared a moment more, as if my presence surprised him, before his stoic expression broke

into a wide grin. After a hasty bow to Rosemarie, he hurried towards me, slowing as he neared me, as

if he only just remembered the tense way we’d parted last time. He paused in front of me.

“Dahlia?” His voice was hesitant, though it did little to lessen his obvious joy at seeing me, such

a contrast to his polite expression while in my sister’s presence. “I was hoping I’d see you today.

What are you doing here?”

“I—” My panic swelled, making it impossible to answer him, especially when he stepped closer,

bridging the much-needed distance between us. How would I be able to gather the strength to let him

go and find happiness outside of myself with him standing so close?

“It’s so good to see you,” he said. “Even though it’s only been a few days, I’ve really missed

you.”

“I’ve missed you, too.” The admission escaped before I could contain it.

My words seemed to encourage him, for he stepped even closer, so that his warmth enveloped

me. “I’m so glad you strolled the gardens today; I feared you’d avoid them after what happened. I’m

so sorry for the way things ended between us the other day. This is all still so new and part of me is

terrified of it not being real, so I allowed my fears and insecurities to assume the worst. But I should

have listened to you. I’m sorry.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. My mouth had gone dry, making it impossible to speak. Luckily I was

spared an answer at Rosemarie’s approach, drawing my attention away from the longing filling

Gladen’s deep blue gaze.

He glanced towards her with clear reluctance and his soft expression was immediately replaced

by princely politeness, one now foreign between us. “Forgive me for my lack of manners. Dahlia, this

is my childhood friend, Rosemarie. And this, Rosemarie”—he turned to me with a smoldering look

that made my cheeks heat—”this is Dahlia.”

“*Dahlia*?” A question filled Rosemarie’s tone as she glanced back and forth between us. I ached

to assure her that whatever suspicion that was likely forming in her mind was entirely wrong, but I

didn’t have the heart to do so in front of Gladen and break his heart all over again.

So instead I managed a stiff nod.

His duty complete, Gladen turned his back on my sister and stepped closer to me, lowering his

voice. “I’m so glad I got to see you again so soon and apologize. Please also let me extend it further:

I’m sorry if I rushed things between us. If your rejection was because you need more time, I’ll wait as

long as you need me to. But I can’t let you go. Please, Dahlia.”

Despite his attempt to keep our conversation private, Rosemarie obviously heard his sweet

words, for her eyebrows shot up and her knowing smile returned, as if she’d assembled the final

piece of the puzzle she’d been forming in her mind.

My cheeks darkened even as shame once more curdled my stomach that I was stealing the man she

was interested in. It was yet another mark on my already stained conscience.

Yet she didn't *look* brokenhearted at all. Instead her eyes were bright, as was her smile, as if

seeing us together only brought her joy. It grew further when Gladen stepped closer and took my

hands.

"Will you allow me to court you, dear Dahlia?"

I ached to accept him, but I couldn't until I talked with my sister and learned what her feelings

were for the prince, as well as how to deal with the impenetrable problem that still remained

between us—that I was not who he believed me to be. There was so much whirling through my mind

it was impossible to sort it all out, especially with the distraction that came from Gladen's tantalizing

touch encircling my hand.

"I need some time," I managed.

Although he was undeniably disappointed, his look remained just as sweet and understanding.

"Take all the time you need." He lifted my hands and kissed them, one at a time, and in those kisses I

knew I was lost. I wanted him, so desperately. But would it be possible to claim him after how much

I'd hurt him?

THE MOMENT we left the garden, Rosemarie took my hand and led me to our bedroom overlooking the

royal grounds, a view which only reminded me of the prince we'd left behind, making this the most

unideal place for the inevitable confrontation with my sister.

She settled in the window seat and gently tugged me to sit beside her, where she wasted no time.

"Prince Gladen is in love with you."

I stilled at her words. Despite our friendship, near kiss, and the sweet, beautiful words he'd just

shared with me, I hadn't allowed myself to admit the deeper emotion they likely signified. Yet the

memory of his touch, the adoring look in his eyes whenever they met mine, his request to court me…

could it possibly be true?

"How do you know he loves me?" I stuttered.

She heaved a frustrated sigh. "Don't play games, Astrid. You know it's true."

My shoulders slumped. "I know, but I wish it weren't, not when he *shouldn't* love me. You heard

the name he called me in the garden—he doesn't even know who I am, that I'm the one who cursed

him.”

“Then perhaps you should tell him so you’ll stop allowing your fear to keep you two apart.”

I frowned. “Are you encouraging me to be with Prince Gladen? I thought *you* wanted his heart.”

She blushed. “I haven’t for quite some time.” Her smile became rather shy. “There’s actually

someone else: one of the potion master’s apprentices, Glenn. We’ve been courting for several weeks

now.”

I stared in disbelief. She was in a *courtship*? While I’d had a small suspicion someone may have

caught her eye, this was much deeper than I’d realized. How could I have missed such a big event in

my sister’s life?

My mind scrambled back, searching for any hints I might have missed, only to find the obvious

signs I’d previously failed to notice—the hours she’d spent absent from the cottage, as well as how

unusually happy she’d been, a joy deeper than her earlier infatuation with her childhood playmate.

Her joyous expression clouded with worry when I was silent for too long. “Do you approve of

him?” she asked anxiously.

I gave her hands a reassuring squeeze. “Of course I do.” I didn’t know that particular potion

master’s apprentice well, but from what I’d seen of him he was a kind and gentle man, perfect for my

sister. “I just feel terrible that I missed such an important part of your life.” How could I be so

wrapped up in myself that I failed to notice my sister was *in love*? Would there be no end to my

mistakes?

“Please, I don’t want you to be upset; you had so much going on.”

It was a pitiful excuse and we both knew it. “But you’re my sister,” I murmured.

She smiled. “You don’t need to prove your love; I know you care for me. And because *I* care for

you, I don’t want you to torture yourself over this. Please, Astrid.”

I ached to protest, but I knew it would do little good, so instead I forced a smile. “Very well.”

I hadn’t fully let go of my regret—that would take some time—but I could begin to try…at least

when my mind wasn’t scrambling to make sense of everything.

“I can’t wait to hear the story of your courtship in every detail, but first I have a question: why did

you agree to meet with the prince on my behalf if you’re not in love with him?”

Her grin was mischievous. “You needed me. Not only did I want to help you, but I had a theory to

prove, and prove it I did. I suspected your true feelings for His Highness, and I hoped that seeing how

the prince interacted with me would help you realize how devoted he is to you—his heart isn’t

available to be claimed by anyone else, least of all me. I want you to also experience the happiness

that comes from love, because I can see you *do* love Prince Gladen, don’t you, Astrid?” Her tone was

so gentle.

I hesitated, almost too afraid to admit my feelings, even to my dearest sister, for as precious as

they were, I wasn’t sure I was strong enough to face them—not if I couldn’t act on them.

“Yes, I do.” It was still surreal to realize this—that the prince whom I used to hate now

completely possessed my heart. “Yet I’m the one who cursed him, a curse that still has yet to be fully

broken. How can I expect a future with the prince after what I did to him?”

“Everyone makes mistakes,” she said. “Just because you did something wrong doesn’t condemn

you to a life of misery, especially when you’ve learned and grown from your experiences. You still

deserve happiness.”

I stared at my sister in wonder. Gone was the young girl I used to shelter, comfort when afraid,

and protect with such dedication. “When did you grow up?”

She smirked. “When you weren’t looking.”

“Clearly. I wish I’d been there to enjoy the journey more.”

“You did,” she said. “You’ve always been there, looking out for me. But you’re not the only one

who desires to protect her sister; I want your happiness as much as you want mine.” She pulled me

into a tight embrace. “Be brave, Astrid. You deserve your own happily ever after. If the prince truly

loves you, as I know he does, he’ll forgive you. I promise.”

Perhaps she was right. After all, hadn’t I forgiven Gladen for what he’d done to Rosemarie,

letting go of my previous resentments to allow myself to open my heart to him?

Yet it was one thing to extend trust and forgiveness, and quite another to ask for it in return. But I

knew that despite my fears he deserved to know the truth—to know who I truly was and what I’d

done. For true love couldn’t exist without trust, thus I needed to do all I could to rebuild what my

previous deceit had harmed. Would it be enough?

But then I remembered the way his smile lit up his expression whenever he saw me, his grace in

turning to me despite his own fears and the obstacles that had risen between us, all of which gave me

hope that even if he saw me for who I truly was—someone vain, impulsive, and magical, yet who

continuously tried to be better—he'd not only accept me, but forgive me. And perhaps his forgiveness

would heal the last bitterness lingering in both of our hearts and fully break the curse once and for all.

Even if his forgiveness was something he couldn't extend, he still deserved to know the truth.

I would fight for my prince. And although my fear hadn't fully abated, Gladen meant too much to

me for me not to try. Like any magic, there was always a risk in casting a spell, but if I succeeded, the

reward would be well worth it.

C H A P T E R 1 2

I t took me several more days to summon my courage. No matter how many times I

rehearsed the confession I knew I needed to give, my anxiousness at the thought of

speaking the words didn't lessen.

My knees bounced nervously as I waited in the rose garden, casting several frantic glances

towards the gate, searching for Gladen. I wasn't entirely certain he'd walk the gardens today, but I

was determined to wait all the same, desperate to get this inevitable conversation over with while at

the same time hoping it'd never come.

The summer day was beautiful. The roses were in full bloom, their sweet perfume filling the

gentle breeze that tangled my hair. I'd spent so much time here with the prince that each rose now

contained a memory, ones I hoped to create many more of…but that would entirely depend on how

Gladen received my confession, or if instead the truth would shatter the magical relationship we'd

created together. How I desperately hoped it wouldn't.

The sound of the gate opening caused me to swivel around to face the garden entrance, but it

wasn't Gladen, only a lord and lady taking a respite from the court to stroll the royal grounds. I

released a wavering breath, one of both disappointment and fierce relief that I could delay my

confession a few moments longer, and relaxed back against the bench to continue waiting.

I ignored the couple's shallow chatter as they took several turns about the garden, instead

rehearsing my confession to Gladen several more times, only pausing at the sound of the prince's

name. I glanced towards the lady who'd spoken.

“The foreign princess is even more beautiful than the prince’s last intended,” she said. “I’m

certain His Highness will agree to the match; His Majesty will see to that. Now that his disfigurement

has vanished, it’d be in the prince’s best interest to marry soon.”

I stiffened. Gladen was to become part of another political arrangement? How had I not heard

about this?

My breaths came quick and sharp as despair warred with the anxiety already whirling within me.

Long after the gossiping courtiers left the garden I tortured myself with thoughts of losing Gladen yet

being forced to work alongside him while he lived his life with another woman.

Only the sound of the gate opening again and the familiar sound of Gladen’s footsteps stilled my

frantic thoughts, as did the familiar way he lit up when he saw me. I studied his expression for any

sign that he’d lost his heart to the visiting princess during the days we’d spent apart, but though I

thankfully couldn’t find any, my worry didn’t entirely ease.

“Am I to extend my congratulations?” I asked as he settled beside me on the bench before he had

the chance to speak.

His brows drew together. “Congratulations? Whatever for?”

“I’ve heard whispers that His Majesty is making another arrangement for you.” The words were

painful to say.

Gladen immediately groaned. “So you *have* heard. I’d been hoping the rumors wouldn’t reach

you; I didn’t want to cause you any unnecessary distress. This is the first opportunity I’ve had to

escape in order to seek you out and reassure you in person. Needless to say, it’s been a very wearying

week.”

My heart sank. “So they’re true?”

Gladen hesitated. “Only in a sense. My father *is* trying to arrange a marriage for me…but *trying* is

all he’s managing to accomplish. He can make as many promises to the royal dignitaries as he wants

and invite dozens of eligible women to the castle, but it’ll change nothing: not only am I tired of being

his puppet, but I have my own arrangement in mind, and nothing will dissuade me from my chosen

course.”

My heart lifted in hope. “And which course might that be?”

“The one we spoke of a few days ago.” Gladen scooted closer on the bench and lightly reached

out to touch the back of my hand with his fingertip. I immediately stilled.

“Gladen?” I managed breathlessly.

He didn’t answer for a moment, his entire focus on lightly brushing up and down my hand, each

distracting touch making it more difficult to focus on what I needed to tell him. “I confess there’s a

reason far more important than my own independence for why I can’t agree to any of my father’s

arrangements.” His smoldering gaze seeped into mine. “*You*.”

“*Me*?” I stuttered.

He nodded. “Meeting you has changed everything. You’ve not only helped me learn to be true to

myself, but you’ve given me hope in a future I previously never imagined could ever be possible—

that it can be filled not only with love, but with someone who sees me for myself and not the prince.

And I won’t allow anyone, least of all my father or *duty*, take away what I’ve always wanted: *love*,

and with it the woman who’s stolen my heart.”

His smoldering gaze met mine and my breath caught. *Oh*. For a moment I was lightheaded, even as

my heart soared at his words. But my fierce joy was short-lived, replaced by fear that it’d slip away

from me once I gave the confession I knew I couldn’t keep to myself any longer.

And yet the words wouldn’t come. Gladen shifted anxiously at my prolonged silence. “Are you

alright, Dahlia? Do you not…share my feelings?”

I took a wavering breath. “Of course I share them. There is no one more dear to me than you.”

His entire expression lit up, and the next instant he cradled my face, his touch light as he ran it in a

gentle caress across my cheeks. “I hoped you did. For years I feared love was not in my future, and

yet…here we are.” Joy lit his gentle smile.

Yes, here we were, and how I desperately wished this was a moment that could always remain, a

wish that only grew when he slowly leaned down, his eyes glinting with purpose.

I knew he meant to kiss me, just as I knew that this kiss shouldn’t happen while I was still cloaked

in my disguise, one which hid the woman who had cursed and disfigured him. Yet masking my

mistakes hadn’t erased them, and Gladen deserved to know the truth.

Yet the part of me that feared that removing the spell I hid behind would change everything wanted

to allow this kiss to happen in order to experience a glimpse of the love I treasured while it lasted. In

this moment was not my past, but just us and this special closeness…one that was further bridged

when his lips lightly caressed mine for a sweet, toe-curling kiss.

I immediately lost myself in him, in the feelings coursing through me, bright, beautiful, and far

more powerful than any magic I'd ever experienced. If I could bottle any moment and preserve it

forever it'd be this one—being cradled in Gladen's tender embrace, feeling his heart beating against

mine as his lips explored our kiss, and experiencing such love and utter peace.

I didn't realize I was crying until I tasted the salt of my tears on our lips, causing me to hastily

break away. Gladen's eyes widened as he took in my tear-streaked face. "What is it, Dahlia?" He

caressed my hair in such a tender way that for a moment I couldn't speak.

His distress and anxiety seemed to deepen the longer the silence stretched between us.

"Dahlia?" he asked gently.

For a brief moment I was tempted not to confess, wanting to keep him with me. But I knew that'd

be selfish, and such a path was too similar to the dark one I'd tread before, one I couldn't bear to

travel again.

"I'm sorry," I finally managed to stutter. "I'd give anything, *anything*—" I couldn't finish.

His brow furrowed. “Why are you sorry? Was it…the kiss?” His insecurity returned, and my heart

wrenched that once more I’d caused him to doubt my feelings for him.

“No, of course not. That was beautiful.”

He relaxed, but his concern didn’t fade. “Then what’s troubling you? Please confide in me. I want

to help you.”

I shook my head. “You can’t. If I tell you…I’m worried I’ll lose you forever. I couldn’t bear—” I

couldn’t finish.

His fingers caressed my jaw to hook beneath my chin and lift my gaze to meet his, his own so

incredibly soft. “You’ll never lose me,” he said. “I love you, I want you, and nothing will ever change

that. I promise, Dahlia.”

His words enveloped me, lending me courage. I wasn’t sure how to begin, only that I needed to

before I lost my resolve. I took a wavering breath. “My name…isn’t Dahlia.”

His brow puckered. “It’s not?” Despite his clear confusion, he still managed a lighthearted smile.

He leaned closer, as if to share a secret. “Then you and I share something in common, for my real

name isn’t *Your Highness*, no matter how many times I answer to it.”

I knew he hoped to make me smile, but I couldn't quite manage one. His own faltered.

"I'm sure there's quite a story behind your using a fake name. Won't you share it with me? More

importantly, I want to know your real name."

"I've been hiding my true identity," I said in a rush, my voice barely above a whisper. "I feared

your reaction should you know who I truly was, what I did…for I did something I deeply regret. To

you."

His confusion only deepened, but it didn't lessen the kindness in his eyes. "No matter what you

did, nothing will change." His tone was so tender, compelling me to trust him, a need which only

deepened when he took my hands and lifted them to his lips. "I promise. For I love you."

"And I love you," I managed breathlessly. "Even though I don't deserve you."

He opened his mouth to protest the point, but his words faltered at seeing the anxiety twisting my

expression. "My assurances to the contrary will be better received when I give them after learning

why you think as you do. Please share your burden with me."

I searched his eyes, aglow with such tenderness as he looked at me, even as his promise

enveloped me. Could such a beautiful promise possibly be real? Could he truly accept and love me,

despite everything I'd done to him?

"The easiest way to explain is by showing you." I slowly extracted my hands and stood. I closed

my eyes and concentrated on the spell covering me. I felt my magic rise from my skin and begin to

glow, causing the enchanted disguise to slowly trickle away, removing the illusion.

By Gladen's sudden sharp breath I knew the disguise had vanished. I braced myself before

opening my eyes to take in his expression. He gaped at me, his face white with shock.

"You're—" His eyes widened as he stared intensely at my face. "Enchantress…Astrid?" He said

my name hesitantly, as if he couldn't quite believe what his eyes were seeing.

I nodded. "Yes, I am Enchantress Astrid."

He didn't speak, only continued to stare, blinking rapidly as if trying to make sense of the vision

before him. It was undoubtedly quite disconcerting for me to look like Dahlia, but for him to finally

recognize me as another woman entirely.

My voice shook as I spoke. "One stormy night I called upon you to gift you a rose, one I had

placed a curse upon. The magic worked, disfiguring your appearance."

He swallowed, and after several attempts to speak he finally found his voice. "It was *you*?"

Disgust tinged his disbelief, causing my eyes to burn.

"It was me," I said. "I'm the one who cursed you."

He said nothing, but when I settled back onto the bench, he scooted away as if no longer wanting

to be close to me, a gesture that spoke louder than any words ever could. "I —don't understand. I've

never understood. *Why*…why did you curse me?"

"Because I was blinded by my own anger," I explained. "At the time I thought seeking revenge

was the only path open to me; an enchantress only resorts to such measures for a reason, and at the

time I felt I had ample reason to do what I did."

He still stared, seeming perplexed…and hurt. "But… *why*?"

"You hurt my sister." The words came out hardened as the wound I thought I'd entirely healed

from reopened. "You broke her heart when you slighted her in the garden, *this* garden. She'd finally

managed to heal after our parents' deaths, and your rejection despite your past friendship caused her

to slip back into that darkness. I thought you a conceited prince who cared nothing for others' feelings,

least of all my dear sister's. I wanted you to pay for what you did, and because I have magic, it

seemed the perfect way to enact my revenge…so I did. And at the time I relished it."

He continued to stare, the pain in his eyes deepening. "I—don't remember doing such a thing."

I snorted. "Of course you don't. But I do. Thus I chose a curse that would reflect the state of your

heart; the fact it changed you only proved your guilt." I regretted the biting accusation the moment I

gave it, especially considering I no longer felt this way.

His shock slowly wore off, allowing his hurt full rein, which was quickly escalating into the

anger I'd always feared but knew I wholly deserved. "You'd condemn me so easily?"

"You were cold and cruel," I said. "So yes, I did."

He opened his mouth, likely to argue, before he paused. I watched him consider my words before

his shoulders slumped. "I…likely did as you said. I found the attention of fawning women wearying,

for each reminded me that no one could see past my title, and thus I'd never find someone who could

truly love me." He lifted his gaze, still hardened. "My actions were wrong, but did they truly warrant

such a punishment?"

“At the time, I thought it fitting, but it went wrong.” I lifted the hand that had once been covered in

warts, which I only now fully realized had mirrored the state of my own heart. “It touched me too, and

because of the hatred I felt towards you at the time, I suffered the same fate. In my desperation to

break the curse, I disguised myself so you wouldn’t know who I was and…”

“…got close to me.” Despair hardened his expression once more. “That’s the only reason you

were able to look past my title, past my disfigurement. It was never about *me*, but only yourself. At

the time I thought you were different, but I should have known no one would ever see me as anything

more than a prince.”

“But I *do* see you,” I said desperately. “Whatever I felt before is gone now that I know you for

who you truly are. And because I do, everything is different. But I was afraid the truth would change

what we’ve created, so I wanted to hide it. But that isn’t love. I had to tell you, despite knowing it

might cause me to lose you.”

Emotion and perhaps even a bit of understanding flickered in his expression…before it faded.

“How can there be love without trust? Could I ever trust you after what you did to me—not just the

curse but the lies that followed, ones you still kept from me even after things were changing between

us? Was any of it even real, or was it all a trick of magic?”

“Magic can’t create love,” I said.

“How do I know that’s true when I’ve witnessed firsthand that it can create not only revenge and

deceit, but false hope when it made me wrongly believe I could finally obtain what I’ve always

wanted?”

The full meaning of his words settled over me. “So I am losing you after all, despite your promise

I never would.” Though I knew it was inevitable, my heart broke all the same.

For a moment he hesitated, but it vanished in an instant, replaced by his own anger. “That promise

was made to Dahlia, a woman who’s nothing more than an illusion. You are not who I thought you

were.”

And with those words he stormed from the garden without a single look back…until he paused at

the gate. He stood there for a long moment, his breaths short and sharp, before slowly, ever so slowly,

he glanced over his shoulder to take in my tear-streaked face.

“Was all of it a lie?”

I tried to convey all I'd grown to feel for him in my look. "No, Gladen, it wasn't. That's why you

deserve to know the truth. And even if you can't keep your promise, I'll keep mine: your heart wasn't

the only one stolen, and now that you have it, I doubt I'll ever get it back."

So many emotions filled his eyes as he stared at me before he finally turned and left me sitting in

the rose garden with the pieces of my broken heart scattered around me like the petals of the

surrounding flowers, all the sweet memories they contained now tainted by the one that had taken

Prince Gladen away from me forever.

I should have known that even a man as wonderful as him could never love the woman who'd

turned him into a beast.

C H A P T E R 1 3

I sighed as I lost control over yet another spell; it slipped from my grasp and faded away,

just like all the magic I'd attempted in the several days since losing Gladen. Whatever

power I'd regained through the light the prince had brought to my life had disappeared

now that he was no longer a part of it, which meant I was losing something else important to me.

Enchantress Ivy glanced over from where she worked beside me. “Are you still struggling?” No

condemnation lined her tone, only sympathy and understanding.

I leaned my elbows against the wooden table where we worked with a heavy sigh. “My powers

are fading more every day. I fear I’ve lost my magic forever.”

Ivy paused in stirring the diplomacy potion His Majesty had requested and laid a gentle hand on

my arm. “Magic will forever be a part of you and thus cannot fully disappear; your powers are simply

blocked.”

“Do I even deserve my powers after everything?”

“We all make mistakes, Astrid, but they don’t lessen your worth.”

That was difficult to accept when my own mistakes had cost me so much. Not only had I neglected

my sister and lost my magic, but I’d hurt the man I loved. I could still feel the shadow of his sweet

kiss on my lips, a recollection I cherished yet which brought me fierce pain when I remembered all

that had followed. I both yearned to keep the memory in my heart forever and wanted nothing more

than to forget it.

As if sensing this secret wish, Ivy’s gaze flickered towards my spellbook, propped open and

floating beside me. “Perhaps it’s good that your magic is temporarily hindered.” She motioned to the

spell on the page. “This isn’t the solution, Astrid. After what’s happened I’d hoped you’d learned to

curb your impulsivity.”

Shame pooled in my stomach as I lowered my eyes to the spell I’d spent days trying to cast: *To*

Forget the One You Love. In truth I knew I didn’t want to forget Gladen, only the pain his absence had

caused me to feel, as well as the regret over my choices that had led me to this point in the first place.

But Enchantress Ivy was right: forgetting him would also cause me to forget all I’d learned

throughout this journey, something I didn’t want, so with a resolute sigh I snapped the book shut. “Will

my magic ever come back?” I asked in a small voice. How I desperately didn’t want it to fade away.

“The source of your powers is light. Once it fills your heart once more, I have no doubt your

magic will follow.”

She crossed the room to retrieve a stone basin filled with shimmery water, the same practice

basin I’d used when first discovering my powers so long ago. The vessel encouraged exploration and

creativity, to discover how to access magic and to learn how it responded. I’d spent hours playing

with my magic within this pool, creating new colors and patterns, delighting in entertaining

Rosemarie and making Mother proud.

I glanced quizzically at Ivy as she set it before me. She answered my silent question. “Your

powers are nearly as dormant as when you first discovered them as a child. To reconnect with them,

you must once more explore them.”

She left the room, leaving me staring into the crystal water. My powers stirred from their sleep as

I touched the water. For the first time in days I felt my magic tingle beneath my fingertips, itching to

reemerge, but I hesitated, almost afraid that dark, lingering shadows still tainted my powers after

what I’d done.

But the yearning to reacquaint with this part of myself was stronger than my fear, compelling me to

run my fingers across the water. My powers were weak, so at first only a drop of violet light emerged

from my hand to ripple across the basin before fading away.

I struggled to capture more of my magic and caressed the water again, bringing more color and

light to the surface, and soon more patterns. They swirled in a blur of varying hues before the magic

slowly transformed into distinguishable shapes, mostly floral in nature. I stared, mesmerized, as color

and light twirled in the basin like a waltz.

I was so engrossed that I scarcely heard the knock on the door or the soft murmurs in the front

parlor. I didn't even look up at the sound of Ivy's footsteps as she entered the room. "Astrid, there's a

request for you to create a spell."

I stilled before spinning around to face her. "A *spell*? You know my powers are still far too weak

to perform any useful magic." And a short practice session with the basin was insufficient to bring me

up to the task.

She smiled. "I'm sure your powers will be sufficient for His Highness's needs."

I felt as if all the air had left my lungs. "*His Highness*? What do you—"

My words trapped in my throat as Prince Gladen himself entered the room, his intense blue eyes

locked to mine.

I scarcely noticed Enchantress Ivy slip away, my entire attention riveted to the prince. His look

was friendly, not angry like I expected after the way we'd parted several days before; he even

managed to give one of his sweet, charming smiles that I always felt were just for me.

“Good morning…Astrid.”

It was strange to hear him speak my real name. For a moment I simply stared before stumbling

into the edge of the table, causing the enchanted water filling the basin to slosh over the rim and spill

onto the counter. “Gladen! I mean, Your Highness, I—” I couldn’t finish.

Some of his nerves seemed to fade at my fluster. He took a deep breath and stepped fully into the

room, approaching me slowly until he stood directly in front of me. For a moment he simply stared,

his eyes wide as he slowly took in my features.

“Amazing,” he murmured. “You still look exactly like the Dahlia I came to know, yet now I

recognize you as the Enchantress Astrid.”

“A simple disguise spell,” I said when I managed to find my voice. “A lot can be accomplished

with magic.”

“I’m glad, for I’m hoping it can help with the request I have in mind.” He stepped closer, bridging

the distance I feared would always be between us. “I’m in need of an enchantress.”

My heart beat erratically at his nearness, one that felt more torturous knowing I could never have

him. I tried to press myself further against the edge of the table. “If you’re in need of an enchantress,

my mentor is very talented…”

“It’s *your* services I require.”

“But…I’m only an apprentice, and with my history, I have little reason to believe you’d ever trust

my powers again.”

My breath caught as he took yet another step closer, his eyes riveted to mine. “That was before.

Now there is no one’s magic I want but yours. Will you help me, Astrid?”

It took me a moment to find my voice, a task made more difficult with the confusion whirling

through my mind. His nearness made me ache for what we’d lost. It was strange to not only find the

prince here, surrounded by simmering cauldrons and mystical ingredients, the potent smell of herbs

punctuating the air, but for him to be earnest rather than angry.

“Gladen—” I hesitantly began before catching myself. I forced myself to straighten, resolving to

be brave, despite feeling anything but. “I will do all in my power to help you, Your Highness, but I

must be upfront: I’m not certain whether I’ll be able to succeed.”

“It’s not a complicated spell.” His brows drew together. “At least I don’t *think* so. I’ve been

spending hours this week reading everything I can about the subject, but I still have much to learn, a

task made more daunting considering my knowledge will always be solely from books rather than

experience."

I blinked in surprise. "You're interested in learning about magic?"

He grinned. "I find that I am, considering it's your own passion." His smile faltered, replaced by

deep concern. "What happened to your magic? From my experience you seem quite powerful."

I sighed. "My magic isn't what it once was. Performing that curse caused darkness to taint it.

Recently the light filling my life allowed my powers to partially return until…" I couldn't bear to

bring up what had transpired between us. But by the knowing look in his eyes, he guessed the somber

direction of my thoughts.

"I imagine you put much of your heart into each spell," he said. "If it's your heart that's weighing

you down, perhaps…I can help you with that."

My breath caught as he stepped even closer, bathing me in his presence until I felt I'd go mad with

longing. "Gladen?"

He reached out a hesitant hand and lightly caressed my cheek. "Allow me to help you. Though I

confess I know little of magic, I'm rather fascinated by it…and by a specific enchantress

specifically.”

Hope warred with the despair weighing my heart as I leaned against his soft touch, one I’d greatly

missed. With his words, the way he was looking at me…could he be here for a reason other than a

simple spell?

“Which spell do you need?” I stammered, but he didn’t answer immediately, so focused on tracing

his thumb up and down my jawline in a thoroughly distracting way.

“You mean other than a well-deserved curse?” His smile was teasing, giving me further cause to

hope that perhaps he could forgive me for that.

“I’ve only ever performed one curse. Until that moment, I’d never used my magic for something so

dark. Yet it was beyond my capabilities. Perhaps that’s why it went wrong.”

“Hmm, it appears to have gone right to me. I didn’t know curses could turn out so well. Maybe

you need to consult your spellbook next time, though I confess I’m pleased in this instance that you

didn’t.”

His gaze was smoldering, causing me to lose nearly all sense. He needed to leave and take the

broken pieces of my heart with him, and I needed to immerse myself in my studies and forget all about

the prince who'd stolen my heart, a task that in this moment seemed utterly impossible.

"You said you're in need of a spell?" I asked again.

He nodded as he lowered his hand from my cheek. "What I'm most in need of can only come from

one specific enchantress: you."

"And what is that?" I asked breathlessly.

He took my hands and cradled them in his. "*Forgiveness*. Tell me, Enchantress Astrid, is that

something you can create for me?"

For a moment I was speechless as I frantically tried to sort through his words. "You want a spell

of forgiveness? That is one thing magic cannot create."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "I know, but I'm certain it is well within the capabilities of

Enchantress Astrid…if she's willing."

"But…I can't, not when it's *I* who needs your forgiveness. Yet you can't forgive me, not after

what I've done."

"I *do* need your forgiveness," he said. "It took a lot of courage for you to confess what you'd done

to me and I reacted badly, and for that I'm deeply sorry."

I continued to stare in disbelief, unable to quite believe the unexpected turn this conversation had

taken. “But…I’m the one who needs to make amends. I’m so, so—”

My apology was cut off by his gentle finger against my lips, silencing the remainder of my words.

“There’s no need for that, not when you’ve already apologized. And now I’ve accepted it.”

“But you *can’t*,” I protested. “What I did to you was horrible and unjust. I don’t deserve—”

“Astrid.” His soft tone and the accompanying gentle squeeze of his hands enfolding mine silenced

the last of my protests. “You can still be good and yet make mistakes.”

The words were so familiar, the same which he’d spoken the afternoon he’d gifted me a violet

rose from his garden.

My eyes widened as he withdrew the very flower I’d given him, still in full bloom. “You still

have that?”

He smiled. “I asked Enchantress Ivy to cast a longevity spell so that it’d last forever. Seeing it

these past several days reminded me of what it symbolizes: that you have a good heart, regardless of

your mistakes.” And he gently pressed the rose into my hand.

Its sweet perfume enveloped me as my fingertips lightly caressed the velvety petals before my

gaze went to the vase on the windowsill where the rose he’d given me still resided. His expression

softened as his gaze followed mine.

“You kept yours, too.”

“How could I not? It was a gift from you.” I burrowed my nose against the rose’s soft petals

before peering shyly back up at him. “Have you really forgiven me? You were so angry.”

“I was,” he said. “Though admittedly I was more hurt. I’d finally found what I’ve spent my life

searching for and I feared my happiness was being stolen. I wanted nothing more than to work through

these emotions with my dearest friend and most trusted confidante, but I couldn’t, not when I’d pushed

her away. Not only did I miss you fiercely, but something more happened.”

He lifted his arm and tugged up the sleeve to reveal a long line of warts, an effect from the curse I

knew all too well.

I moaned. “Oh no, it’s getting worse again. I’m not sure what to do, for I still don’t know how to

break it. But we *must* break it, we *will*. I’ll retrieve Enchantress Ivy—” I started to turn towards the

door but froze when his touch grazed my wrist.

I glanced over my shoulder to find him studying me carefully, his gaze thoughtful as it caressed my

face. “It’s so strange seeing you this way. So much is the same—your mannerisms, your voice, your

personality—yet all with a different face. Yet at the same time, I seem to recognize you, as if part of

me always knew who you really were."

"Because I'm still in training, my skills are only adequate enough to create a charm that deceives

a single sense, in this case your eyes." Reciting magical theory felt safer, as if the facts could protect

my pounding heart from the effects of his proximity.

"Ah, so what you're telling me is that it didn't deceive my heart? That I already knew." As he

spoke his arms lowered to wrap securely around my waist to nestle me close, as if laying claim on

me, despite everything.

My breath hooked and I felt giddy, albeit still confused. "I still don't understand why you're here.

I cursed you." Even though the reminder was entirely unnecessary, by the way he was holding me I

feared he didn't fully understand my past confession.

"You did," he stated matter-of-factly. "Just as I allowed my bitterness to treat you less than you

deserved, hurting you in the process." Fierce regret overshadowed him. "You're not the only one at

fault, Astrid."

I stared up at him, my heart swelling at his sweet sincerity, before lowering my gaze to his wart-

covered hand now grazing my cheek. “Yet my fault continues, considering you still find yourself

cursed.”

“I’ve been thinking about that curse,” he said thoughtfully. “You told me it changes one’s

appearance to reflect what’s in their heart, which makes me realize that though you cast such a spell,

I’m in full control over it, considering it’s *my* feelings that give the curse its power.” His warts

glistened in the flickering lantern light as he lifted his hand. “This reflects the resentment I briefly felt

towards you after your confession. Seeing those dark feelings manifest allowed me to recognize them

for what they were before they could fully take root and overcome me. Now that I do…”

As he spoke, the warts marring his skin began to fade, one by one, until none remained. I stared in

shock. “But how—”

“Any bitterness I might have felt towards you is gone,” he said. “I’m not sure there ever really

was any. It was only my own fear and insecurities, my own wounded pride. But I don’t want to

retread the path my past bitterness led me down, the one you helped me heal from. Despite everything,

I still care for you, miss you, and love you. I need you, Astrid. Thus, I’m here to humbly ask for

another chance. I want nothing to keep us apart, and I forgive you for what you did. Now you need to

forgive yourself.”

That was something I ached to do. “But the curse—”

“It was actually a blessing in disguise,” he said gently. “How can I begrudge the curse that taught

me to be true to myself and, more importantly, brought me to you? Please don’t allow it to keep us

apart any longer. Please forgive yourself, and please say you forgive me. My own love and

forgiveness for you broke the last of the spell. Is it enough for your own heart?”

And finally, after all this time, I felt the healing I’d desperately sought touch my heart, causing it to

swell with compassion towards myself and my own love for him, all of which made it effortless to

extend forgiveness in return. “Always, Gladen.”

He grinned and enfolded my hands back within his. “Thank you. I love you, Astrid. I promised

you in the rose garden that nothing you did could ever cause you to lose my love. Please forgive me

for taking so long to prove my devotion. I vow never to stray again.”

“I know you won’t.” My grin became mischievous as I hooked my arms around his neck. “But it

might be amusing to see how far I can push you. Will you love me even if I turn you into a frog?”

He chuckled and nuzzled against my neck. “Even then, though I would rather not be turned into an

amphibian. It’d be in my best interest to always keep you happy. I suppose love isn’t without risk, but

I can confidently attest that you’re well worth it.”

His tone was teasing, but tenderness lit his eyes, and I knew he meant every word. “You’re very

sweet, so it only seems fair to share a little secret.” I stood on tiptoe so I could whisper into his ear.

“I don’t actually know how to turn people into frogs.”

He tipped his had back and laughed, such a warm, hearty sound. “*Don’t* you? So I don’t have to

keep on my toes quite as much as I thought.”

“I said I don’t know how to turn people into frogs… *yet*. But I *will* learn, and when I do, I’ll need

someone to experiment on.” I wriggled my eyebrows.

He chuckled again as his arms came back around me, holding me even closer, if such a thing was

even possible. “I will serve in whatever capacity you need me.”

“I’m glad you’re so willing considering we’ll be working alongside one another as king and his

enchantress.” My future role I’d always dreamed about felt so different now that I had Gladen’s

heart…different and far more special.

“Hmm, as appealing as that sounds, I have a different and much *better* arrangement in mind. Will

the enchantress object to working not with her king, but her…husband?”

My breath caught. “You want to marry me?”

He stilled, and for a moment he looked almost panicked. “That is the natural progression of

things. What’s the matter? Do you…not want that?”

“There’s nothing I want more than to be with you forever,” I said. “But what of your father…will

he approve?”

After all, he’d been so adamant about the arrangement with Gladen’s first intended, and was even

now in the process of arranging another. What if he was still set on a political arrangement? I had to

be sure he’d grant his approval before I allowed myself to fully embrace the joy filling me to bursting

that Gladen could truly be mine forever.

His lips tickled the nape of my neck where they were currently exploring. “There is no need to

worry. Can you imagine how pleased he’ll be to learn that we’ll have an *enchantress* in the royal

family? We’ll be the envy of all the surrounding kingdoms. But I don’t care about any of that, nor do I

need his approval, not after I've learned to be true to myself. I know exactly who I want, and nothing

will stop me from claiming her."

Happiness washed over me, causing my teasing smile to return. I reached up to graze his jaw.

"*Nothing*? Not even a curse?"

"Not even that." He twisted around to press his lips to my fingertips. "I admit I'm rather

fascinated by the thought that you can do magic. I can't wait to get to know this part of you better."

I intertwined my fingers with his. "Then allow me to show you."

I gently tugged him to the basin where I'd been exploring my powers earlier; it was still aglow

with bright colors and dancing patterns. Gladen stared, his eyes lit with fascination. They widened

further as I dipped my fingertip into the water. A red ripple extended from my touch, twisting to form

a red rose, a fitting image considering a rose had been what had brought us together.

I concentrated on the rose's outline, allowing its vivid image to fill my mind, before I summoned

my magic that had previously felt as if it was slipping away. My happiness allowed my powers to

come instantly at my command, weaving through my whispered spell.

I felt life breathe into the enchantment. I reached into the basin and withdrew the now real rose

and handed it to Gladen. The rose glistened at his touch before bursting into a soft red glow as rose

petals swirled around us like a waltz.

Awe filled his gaze as he watched the petals rain around us before his eyes met mine in wonder.

"*Wow*. What a fantastic trick."

I shrugged. "Even though I'm still in training, I do have a few more up my sleeve."

"And I look forward to discovering each and every one of them." His arms wound back around

me. "Beginning now. I find there's a specific service I require of my enchantress. I hope you're up to

the task?" His gaze flickered down to my lips, causing my stomach to flutter pleasantly.

I raised my brow. "Moments into our relationship and you already need me for something?"

"I promise to make it worth your while." His eyes glistened with purpose as his fingers stroked

my chin, tilting it to the perfect angle to kiss. I stood on tiptoe to meet his lips. The kiss was perfect—

so soft and beautiful—and with it I felt any lingering wounds in my heart soften, dispelling the last of

the curse forever. For being in his arms only confirmed that love was the greatest magic of all.

E P I L O GU E

Despite all the years I'd spent studying magic, it still always surprised me when I

discovered it in the most unexpected places, whether it was the joy that came from

overcoming my past mistakes, the peace that came from healing and forgiveness, the

enchantment of falling in love, or the wonder of living my happily ever after, a fairytale ending that

felt even more special and magical than I could have ever imagined.

Rediscovering my magic had allowed me to continue my studies, and now I was nearing the end

of my apprenticeship. My increase in powers and marriage to Gladen had brought more

responsibilities, but though I found great joy in both roles, I couldn't resist neglecting them for my

current task: a spell of waltzing flowers twirling through the air to the gentle sound of a lullaby.

It'd become easier to control my spells the more my magical skills increased, even when all-to-

welcome distractions chose to interrupt. I heard the gate of the rose garden open, followed by

Gladen's familiar footsteps. Moments later, I felt his warm arms loop around me from behind. I

leaned against him but didn't break my concentration from the enchantment.

But my husband took his role as my distraction quite seriously. He snuggled me close and nuzzled

against my neck, finally causing my spell to falter. I heaved an exaggerated sigh, though in truth I

wasn't really upset with him, a fact he well knew. "You made me lose my focus."

He chuckled. "Oops." He didn't sound sorry at all.

"And it was such a lovely spell. Dahlia was quite enjoying it."

He peered over my shoulder to stare down at our darling daughter, who was now six months old.

She sat contentedly playing with the enchanted petals that had rained over her from my magic, not

looking the least bit tired despite the magical lullaby I'd prepared for her. It appeared magic could

only do so much.

"Do you think she and our future children will inherit your magic?" Gladen asked with

unmistakable hope.

"The odds are at least one will," I said. "Now, are you finished distracting me from my motherly

duties?"

"I'm just helping you learn to focus on your spells despite whichever temptations try to lure your

attention away."

I snorted. “And you consider yourself quite the temptation?”

He turned me around in his arms so I could see his rakish grin. “Quite so. Shall I prove it?” He

leaned in to kiss me. As usual, the heat and allure of his touch caused me to want to give him his way

far too easily.

“I technically have work to do,” I warned before he fully closed the distance between us, but the

protest was halfhearted.

“You do. The prince requires the use of his enchantress.” His lips found my jaw.

“Does he, now? He’s rather demanding. I had no idea when I learned of my future post as your

enchantress all those years ago just how spoiled you’d be.” I hooked my arms around his neck. “Very

well, what do you want? My magic is warmed up and ready to go.”

“Hmm, I never said I wanted your *magic*; I want my *enchantress*.” He dipped down and lightly

kissed me.

I allowed myself to enjoy him a moment, one that unfortunately didn’t last long before we were

interrupted by yet another distraction. I broke away at my spellbook’s disgruntled rustle to see it

flying frantically around Dahlia as she crawled towards a pile of dirt. It opened and planted itself in

front of her to block our daughter from her explorations.

She didn’t seem bothered by its interference, merely giggled and reached out to pat it. It allowed

itself this indulgence before beginning to nudge her closer towards us; she obediently crawled over

and settled at our feet. Its duty satisfied, the spellbook plopped onto its spine and fell open in clear

exhaustion.

“It appears our nanny is off duty,” I said. “Nor does Dahlia seem inclined to nap, despite my best

lullaby spell. It appears I must shift my focus to our dear daughter.” But Gladen didn’t relinquish his

hold on me.

“Wait, just one more kiss. Between Dahlia, your magic studies, and my meetings, I may not see

you again until tonight, and that’s far too long.” He immediately claimed his promised kiss.

“You do know how to charm me,” I murmured against his lips.

He chuckled. “I try. You can’t be the only one with charm in this relationship.”

He kissed me again and I lost myself in him. Being in his arms enveloped my entire being with

light, which as usual lent strength to my powers. My favorite spell burst from me, causing flower

petals to gently rain down around us.

Gladen pulled away to glance up. “What’s this?”

I giggled. “Oops, I’m still learning to control my magic, which especially has a mind of its own

when I’m so happy.”

He grinned widely. “Are you happy?”

“Of course,” I said. “Trust me, you’d know if I weren’t; you’d likely be a frog by now.” For I’d

made it my mission to study human transformations quite thoroughly shortly after our marriage, if for

no other reason than that I delighted in teasing him about it.

He laughed. “You wouldn’t dare do that to your husband.”

“Try me.” I raised my arm, as if to cast a spell, but he took my outstretched hand and pressed a

kiss against my knuckles.

“I’m not scared of you. Even so, I will continue to do all I can to remain in your good graces.”

“It won’t be hard; after all, as you so often remind me, I’m your enchantress.”

“You are indeed. And I’m your prince.” For a moment he stared at me in wonder before glancing

up at the magic swirling around us. “I love your magic. I love *you*.”

My heart warmed, aglow with brightness and enchantment, a magic I never tired of, and one I

doubted I ever would throughout our marriage. “And I love you.”

And I always would. For I knew that the magic Gladen and I shared was one spell that would last

forever.

A L S O B Y CA M IL L E PE T E R S

~

The Kingdom Chronicles:

Pathways

Inspired by “The Princess and the Pea” and “Rumpelstiltskin”

Spelled

Inspired by “The Frog Prince”

Identity

Inspired by “The Goose Girl”

Reflection

Inspired by “Snow White”

Enchantment

Inspired by “Beauty and the Beast”

Voyage

Inspired by “King Thrushbeard”

Awaken

Inspired by “Sleeping Beauty”

~

The Dream World Chronicles:

Dreamer

Nightmare

Insomnia

Daybreak

OT HE R B OOKS IN “ A V IL L A IN ’ S E V E R A F T E R ”

The Sultan and the Story Teller

by Lichelle Slater

Inspired by *Arabian Nights*

Bluebeard and the Outlaw

by Tara Grayce

Inspired by *Bluebeard and Robin Hood*

The Stepsister and the Slipper

by Nina Clare

Inspired by *Cinderella*

The Goblin and the Dancer

by Allison Tebo

Inspired by *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*

Hansel and the Gingerbread Queen

by Lea Doué

Inspired by *Hansel and Gretel*

The Dark King and the Eternal Dance

by Alesha Adamson

Inspired by *Twelve Dancing Princesses* and *Hades and Persephone*

Gothel and the Maiden Prince

by W.R. Gingell

Inspired by *Rapunzel*

The Sorcerer and the Swan Princess

by Lucy Tempest

Inspired by *Swan Lake*

The Baker and the Wolf

by J.M. Stengl

Inspired by *Little Red Riding Hood*

The Prince and the Sea Witch

by A.G. Marshall

Inspired by *Little Mermaid*

Carabosse and the Spindle Spell

by Sylvia Mercedes

Inspired by *Sleeping Beauty*

T H A NK Y O U

Thank you for allowing me to share one of my beloved stories with you! If you'd like to be informed

of new releases, please visit me at my website www.camillepeters.com to sign up for my newsletter,

see my release plans, and read deleted scenes—as well as a scene written from Gladen's POV.

I love to connect with readers! You can find me on Goodreads, Instagram, and on my Facebook

Page, or write me at authorcamillepeters@icloud.com.

If you loved my story, I'd be honored if you'd share your thoughts with me and others by leaving a

review on Amazon or Goodreads. Your support is invaluable. Thank you.

Coming Soon: *The Beast and the Enchantress* introduces the kingdom of Rosileya, one of the

kingdoms featured in my new fairytale series, *The Enchanted Kingdom Chronicles*, where the

children of Astrid and Gladen will all have their own stories.

This series is still in development, but it'll release within the next year or so. The first book in

this series is *Dawn*, which is inspired by *Hades and Persephone*.

A C K NO W L E D GM E NT S

I'm so incredibly grateful for all the wonderful people who've supported me throughout my writing

adventures.

First, to my incredible mother, who's worn many hats over the years: from teaching me to read as

a toddler; to recognizing my love and talent for writing and supporting it through boundless

encouragement and hours of driving me back and forth to classes to help nourish my budding skills; to

now being my muse, brainstorm buddy, beta-reader, editor, and my biggest cheerleader and believer

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in me, and your eager willingness to read my rough drafts and help me develop my stories has been

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dreams, talent, and the opportunities to achieve them, but who loves me unconditionally, always

provides inspiration whenever I turn to Him for help, gives me strength to push through whatever

obstacles I face, and has sanctified all my efforts to make them better than my own.

A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

Camille Peters was born and raised in Salt Lake City, Utah where she grew up surrounded by books. As a child, she spent every spare

moment reading and writing her own stories on every scrap of paper she could find. Becoming an author was always more than a childhood dream; it was a certainty.

Her love of writing grew alongside her as she took local writing classes in her teens, spent a year studying Creative Writing at the

English University of Northampton, and graduated from the University of Utah with a degree in English and History. She's now blessed

to be a full-time author.

When she’s not writing she’s thinking about writing, and when’s she’s not thinking about writing she’s…alright, she’s always thinking

about writing, but she can also be found reading, at the piano, playing board games with her family and friends, or taking long, bare-foot

walks as she lives inside her imagination and brainstorms more tales.

Document Outline

- Title Page
- Copyright
- Dedication
- Contents
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Epilogue
- Also by Camille Peters
- Other Books in “A Villain’s Ever After”
- Thank You
- Acknowledgments
- About the Author

Table of Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Epilogue
Also by Camille Peters
Other Books in “A Villain’s Ever After”
Thank You
Acknowledgments
About the Author
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Contents